



Learning from subject review 1993-2001



Sharing good practice

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Chairman's Foreword

Between 1993 and 2001 a cycle of reviews of academic subjects was undertaken in higher education in England and Northern Ireland. This report examines the findings of the seven rounds of the subject review cycle, which were carried out by the Quality Assessment Division of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) until 1998 and thereafter by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the Agency). During the cycle, 2,904 subject review visits were made, encompassing 62 subject areas. As each round came to an end, an overview report was published for each subject area.

The individual subject review reports placed in the public domain an unprecedented amount of information about the quality of higher education programmes in England and Northern Ireland. This report provides a synopsis of the major trends and findings that the subject review reports revealed, and attempts to assess the extent to which subject review achieved the purposes that were intended for it.

The report is concerned with the quality of higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland between 1993 and 2001 and a number of general observations can be made. The overwhelming majority of subject provision was approved. Very little had to be revisited. As the cycle unfolded it became apparent that providers were adopting a more systematic approach to the design and delivery of higher education programmes than in the past. This manifested itself in a number of ways, including approaches to the design of the curriculum, the delivery of teaching and learning, student support and guidance, the management of learning resources and the management and enhancement of quality. However, review teams also found opportunities for improvement. These were largely related to the assessment of students and the management and enhancement of quality.

Subject review was always contentious. This report, while recognising that fact, does not seek to reignite the debate as to the merits of the process. It is provided as a synopsis of the trends found in the 2,904 subject review reports and 62 subject overview reports. It highlights both the lessons learnt and the opportunities for the dissemination of good practice in learning and teaching between subjects and institutions. As such, I hope that it will be a useful source of information for higher education providers and policy makers, and those people engaged in the study of higher education.

Christopher Kenyon CBE

Chairman of the Agency, 1997-2004

Dedication

This publication records the history of one of the largest programmes of evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning support in higher education ever undertaken. Even for those who were heavily involved with it at one stage or another, this overview of 10 years of activity and critique serves as a reminder of the scale and the audacity of the venture. Given that many people had individual and idiosyncratic experiences of subject review, it also serves to focus the attention on the large-scale impact of the process and the results that it delivered for the sector as a whole.

The person who was most centrally involved in subject review from beginning to end was Dr Peter Milton, to whom this volume is dedicated. From my first appearance in the Quality Assessment Division of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Peter was completely engaged with every aspect of the process, from leading teams of assessors to writing the Assessors' Handbook, the *vade mecum* of everyone involved with it. With the creation of the Quality Assurance Agency, Peter took over the direction of subject review and guided it to its completion in 2001. His commitment and energy made a substantial contribution to the enhancement of our understanding of best practice in teaching and learning support.

Speaking to Peter one week before he died, I learned of his mounting pleasure, and relief, that the process of writing this document was coming to a conclusion. It is greatly to be regretted that he did not live to see it published, as in large part the achievements of that process were also Peter's achievements as well, for which the higher education sector in England and Northern Ireland will, in the longer term, have much to be thankful.

Dr Paul M Clark

Director of Quality Assessment, HEFCE, 1993-96, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Learning and Teaching)
The Open University

Acknowledgements

The compilation of this report has involved a substantial amount of work over a considerable length of time and has involved a number of people. The late Dr Peter Milton, to whom it is dedicated, undertook much of the early work. Peter's work was developed into this report principally by Adam Biscoe and Gerry Crawley. It was Gerry, though, who methodically and unstintingly undertook the reading and analysis of 193 subject review reports and 62 subject overview reports. He then crafted the findings into the seven chapters, which make up the main body of this report.

Adam Biscoe

Executive summary

The cycle of higher education (HE) subject reviews in England and Northern Ireland began in 1993 and was completed in 2001. Subject groups across 62 subject areas in all universities and colleges funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the comparable bodies for Northern Ireland were included. Some 2,904 subject review reports were produced. In addition, an overview report for each subject area was published.

This report is a synopsis of the major trends and findings of the cycle of subject review. The broad findings are:

- HE provision in England and Northern Ireland was generally found to be of a very high quality: the overwhelming majority (99 per cent) of subject review visits resulted in the provision being approved in the first instance. This was true not only of provision in universities and HE colleges, but also in the further education colleges included in the subject review cycle after 2000, although only 97 per cent of the last were approved in the first instance.
- The main aims set by the HEFCE in 1994 for subject review were to ensure accountability of public funds; provide public information on the quality of HE in England and Northern Ireland; and act as a mechanism for the sharing of good practice. These aims were broadly achieved.
- More than 5,700 subject specialist reviewers and 98 review chairs were trained to undertake subject review visits in what was the largest ever single staff development exercise in UK higher education. The reviewers acted as an important conduit for the dissemination of good practice within their institution. The publication and wide circulation of subject review and subject overview reports contributed to the spread of good practice across the sector.
- During the period 1993-2001 providers became more self-critical and adopted a more systematic and rigorous approach to the design and delivery of HE programmes. Their focus now includes more explicitly student achievement of relevant and clearly stated learning outcomes.
- Concerns about the quality of some aspects of provision, particularly the assessment of students and quality maintenance and enhancement processes applied at the subject level, continued as a theme throughout the cycle.
- HE provision in England and Northern Ireland managed to enhance considerably the quality of students' learning during the subject review cycle, despite considerable changes to its operating environment.

Subsequently, the HE sector in England and Northern Ireland has not been complacent about the quality of education. A new era of quality assurance, including a stronger emphasis on the maintenance and enhancement of academic standards, has already begun.

Guide to findings

The following is a summary of the findings in the main body of the report, grouped by chapter.

Aims and objectives

- problems with the clarity of aims and objectives persisted across the review cycle;
- a wide variety of aims across subjects and institutions reflecting diversity of provision in the variety of programmes delivered;
- increasing prominence given to the aim of developing students' transferable skills, and developing students as independent learners.

Curriculum design, content and organisation

- evidence of a more strategic approach to the planning of curricular content;
- curricular content now better related to the aims and objectives of the provider;
- greater attention paid to subject, generic and transferable skills in the curriculum;
- increased flexibility within the curriculum;
- transferable skills not always systematically mapped across modules in a consistent manner;

- currency of curriculum could be strengthened in some cases by closer links with local/regional employers.

Teaching, learning and assessment

- clear strategies for teaching and learning now more common place;
- far greater clarity in defining learning outcomes and in ensuring that the teaching and learning methods employed enabled the students to achieve the learning outcomes;
- significant innovation in teaching and learning, including diversification of methods employed and extensive use of information technology (IT);
- high-quality of teaching sustained over the period;
- establishment of learning and teaching committees contributed to the wider dissemination of good teaching practice;
- students encouraged to take greater responsibility for their learning;
- wider range of assessment methods employed;
- assessment of a broader range of skills;
- students better informed about assessment criteria;
- students more likely to receive sound feedback on their assessed work;
- some providers do not have well defined teaching and learning strategies;
- some times over reliance on teaching methods which did not encourage student involvement in their learning;
- lack of coherence in their assessment strategies;
- some evidence of assessment methods not well matched to learning outcomes;
- some concerns about the quality of feedback provided on students' assessed work.

Student progression and achievement

- improvements in management information systems so that the progression, performance and achievements of students were more accurately recorded, and could be fed into enhancing the student experience;
- recognition and response to the needs of a far more diverse student population;
- higher levels of attainment overall as reflected in class of awards;
- students acquired a broader range of transferable skills;
- students successful in gaining employment or in proceeding to further study;
- lingering concerns about the reliability of statistical data, particularly in relation to career destination data.

Student support and guidance

- excellent care for students delivered through effective systems, and served by dedicated and caring staff;
- further education colleges (FECs), partly due to the size of HE provision, was particularly well equipped to achieve a close and caring community between staff and students;
- clear evidence of innovation and enhancement in the support and guidance offered to students;
- improvements in the admission and induction arrangements, particularly for mature students and those with non-traditional entry qualifications;
- staff often specifically trained for personal tutoring role;
- sound systems usually in place to support students on placement visits significant extension of study skills programmes, and support for students in need of remedial assistance;
- part-time students and students on joint programmes did not always receive the same level of advice as single honours students;
- less structured tutor support for postgraduate students.

Learning resources

- a more strategic approach in making decisions of learning resources so that they were more closely integrated into programme planning;
- increasing establishment of learning resource centres;
- learning resources more readily accessible to students;
- increasing use of IT resources;
- evidence of enhancement in the provision of specialist equipment, collections and museums;
- quality of accommodation remained a concern for reviewers, although substantial developments were evident later in the review cycle;
- administrative, secretarial and technical staff undertake important functions, and often closely integrated into the provision.

Quality (assurance) management and enhancement

- in some early reviews clear and comprehensive quality frameworks did not exist;
- similarly, there was over-reliance on informal quality procedures that lacked rigour or were insufficiently robust;
- examples of excellent annual monitoring were common place but not universal. In some instances annual monitoring did not occur, or were based on a deficient evidence base;
- increasingly, quality management systems elicited the views of students;
- concerns with regard to the operation of the external examiners system persisted throughout the cycle of review;
- there were many examples of effective involvement of professional bodies and employers in the provision of courses;
- staff development strategies became commonplace, including staff appraisal and peer observation of teaching, and the dissemination of good practice;
- arrangements for the induction, mentoring and training of new full time staff were often commended, but less often for part-time staff or research and postgraduate students involved in teaching.

Background to Subject review

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide a synopsis of the major trends and findings of subject review in England and Northern Ireland during its nine years of operation (1993-2001) and to consider the extent to which subject review achieved the purposes set for it. In particular, it focuses on student learning and how some of the factors that affected this changed during the period. As such it highlights both good practice and areas where the opportunities for improvement were observed.

This report has been written for key stakeholders with a specific interest in HE. Thus, it is aimed principally at HE policy makers, academic practitioners, quality managers and researchers looking at pedagogical issues. It will also be of interest to overseas policy makers wanting to be informed about the experience and outcome of the largest ever exercise of external subject review yet undertaken anywhere. However, although it includes a summary of the changes that were observed to be influencing student learning between 1993 and 2001, it is not written principally with an audience of current or prospective students in mind.

In recent decades responsibility for HE has been increasingly devolved, especially in terms of funding, to the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Although external review at the subject level operated during the 1990s in Wales and Scotland, it differed significantly from that in England and Northern Ireland. This report is focused solely on the cycle of subject review in England and Northern Ireland.

The report has three main sections. The introductory section sets out the statutory basis for subject review, the changing context in which it was undertaken, and briefly outlines the subject review method and the ways in which it was revised during the period. It also explains the method used for compiling this report. The second section is the main body of the report, and is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter analyses the trends reported in providers' efforts to set out their aims and objectives. The following chapters analyse in turn the reported trends for each aspect - curriculum development, content and organisation, teaching learning and assessment, student progression and achievement, student support and guidance, learning resources, quality (assessment) management and enhancement - that were the focus of detailed scrutiny in the reviews. Each chapter has four sub-sections: the first briefly outlines the scope of each aspect; the second provides a statistical analysis of the grades awarded between 1995 and 2001. The third sub-section provides a detailed analysis of the main findings. The final sub-section highlights some of the main conclusions to be drawn. The final section of the report, the conclusion, assesses the extent to which the main purposes set for subject review were achieved. In so doing it draws together the findings of the main body of the report.

Rationale for, and context of, subject review

This section describes the statutory basis for subject review and briefly outlines the dynamic context in which the cycle of subject review (1993-2001) was conducted. It also describes the key constant features of the subject review method, and notes the major changes that were introduced during the cycle.

The statutory basis for subject review

The statutory basis for subject review was the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 (Section 70). The Act required HEFCE to 'secure that provision is made for assessing the quality of education provided in institutions for whose activities they provide, or are considering providing, financial support'.

At the start of the work to meet this requirement through what initially became known as Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA), HEFCE identified three purposes of quality assessment:

- i. to ensure that all education for which HEFCE provides funding was of satisfactory quality or better, and to ensure speedy rectification of unsatisfactory quality;
- ii. to encourage improvements in the quality of education through the publication of assessment reports and an annual report;
- iii. to inform funding and reward excellence.

In the light of experience gained from a series of pilot reviews undertaken in 1993, institutions' responses to HEFCE's plans for the development of teaching quality assessment, and further statements by Government, HEFCE, in 1994, restated the purposes of what was subsequently to become known as subject review. They were to ensure 'accountability of public funds, provide a link with funding to enhance quality, providing accessible public information, and sharing and publicising best practice'.

The changing context of subject review

The subject review cycle did not occur in isolation. The nine-year cycle, spanning much of the 1990s, was a period of significant development in the HE sector, and any synopsis of the major trends and findings of subject review need to be set within the context of these changes. The most important developments were:

1. Changes in Government Policy

- A decision in the early 1990s rapidly to increase the proportion of 18-30 year olds experiencing some form of HE, from 10 per cent to 30 per cent. In 1997, following the election of a Labour Government, a commitment was made to increase this proportion further, to 50 per cent of 18-30 year olds.
- The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was introduced in 1986. This procedure was designed to link research funding to research quality. A competitive exercise operated by HEFCE, the RAE is widely believed to have tilted academic activity more towards research, arguably at the expense of the focus on teaching.
- In 1996 the government appointed the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, under the chairmanship of Lord Dearing. Its terms of reference were 'To make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years, recognising that higher education embraces teaching, learning, scholarship and research'. Its far-reaching and influential report Higher Education in the learning society (often referred to as the Dearing Report) was published in 1997. It recommended the replacement of universal teaching quality assessment with a 'lighter touch' approach that included a focus on academic standards. To underpin this methodology the report also recommended the creation of an 'academic infrastructure'.
- In 1999 the responsibility for funding HNC programmes was transferred from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) to HEFCE. As a result, all HNC programmes came within the purview of subject review.
- Between 1993 and 2000, unit funding by Government per full-time equivalent (FTE) student fell in real terms from £5,820 per annum to £4,900 per annum (www.dfes.gov.uk/statistics/DB/SBU/b0285/162-t8.htm).

2. Changes in the nature of provision

- In recent decades there have been significant shifts in pedagogical thinking, which were in part encompassed in the Dearing Report. These included an emphasis on the student's concurrent acquisition of key or transferable skills (for example, communication, numeracy, the use of information technology (IT) and learning how to learn) and of cognitive skills (for example, an understanding of methodologies or ability in critical analysis) and subject knowledge. Also, there has been a shift of emphasis from teaching to learning (especially independent learning) and an increasing focus on intended learning outcomes.

- The introduction of IT, including relatively inexpensive personal computers, email and public access to the internet, has impacted on HE students in a number of ways. These include:
 - i. employers have increasingly expected graduates to have a grounding in the use of IT;
 - ii. many providers have developed e-learning strategies and resources;
 - iii. providers are increasingly expected to make electronic learning resources available, for example, electronic library catalogues, access to electronic information and databases, access to email and the internet, and the provision of increasingly specialist hardware and software. This has placed a further major demand upon their resources.
- Subject review began at a time when UK higher education was in the process of reviewing curriculum structures, especially in the light of the trend towards modularisation.

3. *HE in the global context*

- The subject review cycle in England and Northern Ireland cannot be seen in isolation from wider developments in international HE, both elsewhere within the UK, and overseas. Overall, the United Kingdom has experienced a significant increase in the number of European Union and overseas students studying in the UK, and remains a net exporter of educational services. However, there is strong competition for students, especially from the United States of America and Australia, and from distance-learning providers. The quality and standards of HE are now an important consideration for students choosing a foreign country in which to study.

Changes to the method of subject review (1993-2001)

The subject review cycle began in 1993 and ended in 2001. During this period there was one major (in 1995) and two minor modifications to the method of review. Full descriptions of the various review methods are contained in HEFCE's Quality Assessment Handbooks (1993, 1995 and 1996) and the Agency's Subject Review Handbooks (1998 and 2000).

Key principles of subject review

The term 'subject' is used in this report as shorthand for the unit of activity that was reviewed. A subject might contain one or more courses or programmes of study, possibly at different levels (for example, diploma, undergraduate, taught postgraduate). For the purposes of subject review, HEFCE determined the broad definition of each subject area (see annex 2).

Normally, review teams comprised at least three subject specialists and a review chair. Where the subject under review was large or complex the number of subject specialists was increased proportionately in agreement with the institution.

Subject review was a system of external peer review. More than 5,700 subject specialists, who understood the particular subject under scrutiny and were familiar with HE teaching and learning processes, were recruited and trained as reviewers. The vast majority of subject specialists were teachers in HE. The remainder were recruited from industry and the professions. The training programmes were developed by a combination of staff from HEFCE, and, after 1997, the Agency and the Universities' and Colleges' Staff Development Agency (UCoSDA), later the Higher Education Staff Development Agency (HESDA). From 1995 onwards, review chairs also became involved in the planning, preparation and delivery of these intensive training sessions. In part, they took the form of a simulated visit. Every session was evaluated fully and evaluations indicated that these sessions were successful as staff development for trainees as well as training for subject review visits.

Some 98 review chairs were recruited and trained. The review chair was responsible for the whole process, from receipt of the self-assessment document (SAD) to production of the final report, and managed the review team's activities. Review teams were assisted by the Visit Support Team based initially at HEFCE, and from 1998 at the Agency.

Using the published review handbooks, review teams assessed the quality of educational provision in terms of the educational experience of students, judged against the subject providers' own stated aims and objectives. The aims and objectives were set out in the SAD, in which providers were also required to undertake their own evaluation of the provision and provide general data, such as progression statistics, that would be useful to review teams.

Review visits were necessarily of limited duration, usually no more than three and a half days in the institution. They normally included meetings with subject staff, students, graduates and employers. Reviewers also observed teaching and learning and reviewed samples of assessed student work. The visits resulted in evidence-based judgements for each aspect under review, an oral feedback meeting and, after 1995, a published report.

In order to ensure fairness, institutions' had a right to complain about the outcome of a subject review or, in the case of a failing (grade 1) judgement, to make a representation. This process was initially operated by HEFCE, and later by the Agency. Exceptionally, where there appeared to be a significant perversity in either the judgement or in the way in which the review process had been undertaken, HEFCE could, and did, initiate a full or partial re-review.

1993-1995

In the first round of subject review known as Quality Assessment (1993-1995), subject providers, within their SAD, were invited to judge themselves as either 'excellent' or 'satisfactory' in terms of the quality of their educational provision. All SADs were read by a review chair and a pro forma completed. In order to claim excellence, the SAD had to provide a specific section citing evidence for the claim. If the provider claimed excellence, two review chairs read the SAD. Where there was insufficient evidence to support the claim of excellence, the provision was judged to be satisfactory. Where there was sufficient supporting evidence, a review team was appointed to undertake a visit. If the team corroborated the claim of excellence, then the original claim stood. If not, they were judged to be satisfactory. The subject providers judging themselves satisfactory were visited by a team on a sample basis. All provision identified as potentially unsatisfactory was visited.

During a visit, reviewers were invited to confirm the providers' claim or to conclude otherwise. The judgement of unsatisfactory was also open to review teams. Such a judgement led to a re-assessment within one calendar year in order to assess the progress made by the provider in addressing the deficiencies identified by the original review team. A further judgement of unsatisfactory at this re-assessment could result in partial or complete withdrawal of funding by the funding body. Reports were published only where a visit had been undertaken. Four subject overview reports were produced at the end of the first cycle of subject review.

1995-2001

The most significant alteration to the method of subject review occurred in 1995. This was the result of internal reflection by HEFCE, external evaluation initiated by HEFCE, and extensive feedback from institutions on the operation of subject review to date. The following major changes were introduced:

- a system of universal visiting was introduced;
- subject providers were no longer required to judge the quality of their own provision;
- six inter-related aspects of provision were established to provide a more coherent structure to review activity:
 - i. Curriculum design, content and organisation (CDCO)
 - ii. Teaching, learning and assessment (TLA)
 - iii. Student progression and achievement (SPA)
 - iv. Student support and guidance (SSG)

- v. Learning resources (LR)
- vi. Quality Assurance and Enhancement (QAE) pre-1998 and Quality Management and Enhancement (QME) post-1998;

- each aspect was numerically graded 1-4, with 4 representing the highest grade (see annex 1)
- where one or more grades 1 were given, the provision would be subject to a re-review within one year. A further grade 1 judgement could result in the partial or complete withdrawal of funding;
- all reviews resulted in a published report;
- after all subject providers within a particular subject area had been visited a subject overview report would be compiled to provide an overview of the quality of HE within the subject area.

Three further alterations to the method, introduced under the aegis of the Agency in 1998, are noteworthy:

- institutions were invited to appoint an institutional facilitator (IF) to liaise between the review team and the subject providers. Importantly, along with all other participants in the process, they were expected to act as guardian of the subject review process, ensuring that the visit was conducted in accordance with the methodology set out in the relevant Subject Review Handbooks.
- where a review team judged that three or more aspects made only an acceptable contribution to the providers' aims and objectives (grade 2), the institution was required to produce an action plan to demonstrate how it would address the identified shortcomings in the quality of education. This was followed-up with a one-day visit to the institution by an Agency officer to check the progress in implementing the action plan, and to check that the quality of students' education had been, or was in the process of being, enhanced.
- the focus of the sixth aspect, 'Quality Assurance,' was altered to 'Quality Management and Enhancement'. In part this was intended to re-focus reviewers' enquiries away from institutional policies and procedures, which were dealt with by Agency institutional audits, towards their application by those at the subject level who were responsible for the local management of quality and standards.

It is also important to note that in 1999 HEFCE took over from FEFC responsibility for funding HNC programmes in further education colleges (FECs). Consequently, all FEC provision of HE funded by HEFCE came within the orbit of subject review. Some 280 subject reviews were carried out in FECs during the nine-year cycle, the vast majority of which were undertaken between 1999 and 2001 as a result of this change in funding.

The method of analysis

This report is based on the 62 subject overview reports, together with a sample of 193 subject review reports which comprise all the reports from seven institutions. This approach is intended to demonstrate changes to the learning experience of students across the period of subject review. The institutions were chosen on the basis that they covered a broad range of institutional types: civic and non-civic universities; pre and post-1992 universities; a HE college and a FEC. The selected institutions offered an extensive range of subjects, which allows this report to comment on all subject areas.

The format of each subject review report after 1994 included sections on: aims and objectives; curriculum design, content and organisation; teaching, learning and assessment; student progression and achievement; student support and guidance; learning resources; and quality (assurance) management and enhancement. To arrive at the findings in this report, the content of the sample of 193 subject review reports was analysed to identify any overall patterns or trends. These findings were then considered in the light of the outcomes of the 62 subject overview reports. The use of the subject overview reports as a control provided confidence that the sample of subject review reports chosen for the report was representative of the sector as a whole.

Analysis and findings

Aims and objectives

The subject review method was based on each institution's self-assessment of its provision in the subject under review. The SAD presents the aims and objectives of the provision. The aims summarise the broad educational purpose of each institution providing the subject under review. The objectives set out the learning outcomes of each programme and level of study in the subject.

The statements of aims and objectives were designed to take full account of the diversity of provision in HE. They also established the basis for reviewers' evaluation of the extent to which the students' learning experience and achievements in each aspect of provision contributed to meeting the objectives set for the subject. Reviewers also evaluated whether the objectives, and the level of their attainment, allowed the aims set by the provider to be met. In order to make a judgement about the quality of provision, the reviewers needed the aims and objectives to be clear, and to summarise the distinctiveness of the provision.

Given their importance as a starting point for the review process, it was surprising that approximately 25 per cent of SADs were returned to institutions because of a lack of clarity in their aims and objectives. This occurred despite clear guidance given to institutions in the various subject review handbooks on the way aims and objectives should be defined. In the majority of subject overview reports, reviewers found the set aims and objectives to be clear and in line with the guidance presented in the subject review handbooks.

In a number of subject overview reports it was noted that in only a minority of cases there was a clear link between aims and specific objectives. Also, a significant minority of providers did not distinguish clearly between aims and objectives, and a majority failed to give specific aims and objectives for each programme and level of study, or to express objectives as learning outcomes. Only a few institutions indicated separate aims and objectives for taught postgraduate programmes. Such comments were not specific to particular subject areas and similar comments were found in other overview reports.

Despite these concerns, there was clear evidence from the later overview reports that an increasing number of institutions were now defining objectives in terms of expected learning outcomes at each level of study. In many of these, it was common to find the defined objectives listed in student handbooks as learning outcomes for their programme of study. This was a significant enhancement in the quality of provision ensuring all students and staff possessed a clear understanding of what was required on each programme of study.

In the vast majority of reports, a connection was made between the institution's mission statement and the subject aims and objectives. However, in some overview reports it was noted that mission statements were somewhat formulaic in character and were too general to be readily applied at the subject level.

There was a wide variation in the aims set by institutions reflecting the diversity of each institution's history, their perceived market for students and their definition of the subject under review. However, there was a set of common aims that appeared in many SADs. At a general level, reference was made to providing a supportive student-centred learning environment. This may have been complemented by specific claims concerning the high quality of teaching and the physical resources available to students.

In the majority of reports the aim of preparing students for employment and in being responsive to the changing social and economic environment of industry and commerce at local, regional and national levels was prominent. In the more vocationally-relevant programmes, the aim of maintaining close links with employers was emphasised. The majority of reports also established the aim of ensuring that the curriculum was up-to-date and reflected new developments in the subject.

A large number of programmes prepared students for membership of a variety of professional and statutory bodies (PSBs), including accountancy, architecture, computing, engineering, law, medicine and related professions, and social work. In all of these, the aims stressed the importance of meeting the requirements of PSBs. In some cases, however, institutions allowed PSB requirements to constrain unduly their statement of aims and objectives. In the overview report for Applied Social Work it was noted that some institutions merely replicated the professional body's guidelines, whereas others displayed more imagination and creativity, while remaining within the regulatory framework.

In meeting the requirements of PSBs, many programmes set as a key aim the opportunity for students to gain work experience. This was not confined to professional programmes, and an increasing number of programmes, across a range of subjects, aimed to offer students work experience or a period of study abroad.

It was common for the general aims of the provision to claim that the institution was a centre of excellence at regional, national or international levels with a commitment to high-quality teaching and research. Many also had the aim of providing flexible programmes of study that offered students extensive choice. This reflected, in part, the rapid development of modular programmes in the 1990s, allowing students to study a subject as a single subject or in various combinations with other subjects.

More specific aims, geared to the achievements of students, included the aim of recruiting students of the highest quality and presenting them with intellectually challenging programmes. In contrast, many other institutions gave priority to the aim of widening access to HE through the recruitment of mature students, part-time students and those with non-traditional entry qualifications. In both cases, this was usually supported by the aim of ensuring the intellectual development of students so that all realised their potential.

Reference was frequently made to the aim of developing students' enthusiasm for the subject, usually with some comment about the impact of staff scholarship research and consultancy. Reference was made in a few of the early SADs, but with far greater frequency in recent reports, to the aim of providing innovative teaching, with a diversity of learning opportunities, that facilitated students' independent learning.

Specific subject aims referred to the students' progressive acquisition of core theoretical and conceptual knowledge, and the attainment of subject-based skills. In the more vocationally-orientated programmes, it was common to see reference to the aim of developing students' professional attitudes, values, ethics, and sensitivity to wider social, economic and political considerations.

Many institutions also aimed to develop students' transferable skills. Some overview reports pointed to a shrinking student job market for graduates in some subjects and the need, therefore, to equip students with a broader set of skills. However, in many of the early overview reports it was common to find institutions making no reference at all in their aims to the need for such skills. In marked contrast, it was exceptionally rare not to find reference in post-1998 SADs to the importance of students' transferable skills.

In many subject overview reports, particularly those in the early rounds of subject review, there was evidence of clear differences in the way institutions prioritised their aims and objectives. For pre-1992 institutions, their aims and objectives emphasised the students' acquisition of knowledge and skills intrinsic to the subject, so that they mastered the theoretical, conceptual and factual aspects of the subject. They stressed the recruitment of students of the highest calibre, the importance of excellence in research and the construction of an intellectually challenging environment. In essence, the emphasis was on inputs and the process of acquiring knowledge. This approach was based on the justifiable assumption that the provision of high-quality teaching and scholarly pursuits for well-qualified entrants would produce high-quality graduates who were capable of pursuing a career in industry, teaching, commerce or research.

In contrast, institutions newly designated as universities, HE and FECs (post-1992 institutions) frequently used a subject to develop generic and transferable skills that have greater vocational relevance. They often prioritised access by recruiting mature students, part-time students and those with non-traditional entry qualifications. The emphasis here was on the outcomes of the students' educational experience. In all instances, however, the overall aim was to foster intellectual development by innovative teaching and diverse methods of learning, thereby helping as many students as possible to realise their potential.

Although these differences between pre and post-1992 institutions remained to some extent, later overview reports demonstrated increasing convergence of mission. Newer institutions made more reference to research in their aims, while more traditional institutions paid greater attention to widening access and developing transferable skills. This was confirmed in a number of subject overview reports, where it was noted that the aims and objectives of subject providers were similar in many respects. This conclusion was also supported by the detailed study of all the subject review reports in the sample of seven institutions.

The objectives defined in SADs should have set out the intended learning outcomes that demonstrated successful completion of each programme and level of study, and the learning experience provided to ensure these outcomes were achieved. In broad terms, the overview reports revealed three categories of objectives: those concerned with the acquisition of subject knowledge, those dealing with generic skills and those dealing with key transferable skills.

Objectives dealing with subject knowledge emphasised the importance of students acquiring deep factual knowledge of the subject, together with an understanding of the fundamental conceptual and theoretical base of the subject. Many institutions stressed in their objectives the importance of students being aware of the key theoretical debates informing developments in the subject. Reference was made to the way theory was related to practice and in the more vocational subjects, this involved applying the subject in vocational contexts. In a number of reports, emphasis was placed on the links with related subjects and the significance of interdisciplinary study. However, a number of overview reports questioned the extent to which this objective was achieved. This was particularly so in the reports for American Studies and Environmental Studies.

It was also clear from the overview reports that institutions varied in the way they defined the knowledge boundaries of the subject, leading to quite different objectives for subject content. In Anthropology, some institutions emphasised a biological approach to the subject, whereas others placed emphasis on the social dimension. Similarly, in American Studies there was a division of approach between those whose objectives stressed students' knowledge and understanding of a specific discipline area, such as literature or history, and those placing a greater emphasis on students' understanding of American culture.

There was considerable variety in the way institutions treated generic skills. In some SADs these were not referred to at all, whereas in others there were exhaustive lists of the generic skills students were expected to acquire. These included the intellectual skills of enquiry and investigation and the objective of developing students' capacities for critical analysis, interpretation, reflection, evaluation and synthesis. In this category, reference was also made to students developing research, subject-practical and problem-solving skills.

In the early overview reports only limited reference was made to the objective of enabling students to assume greater responsibility for their learning, so that they become independent learners equipped for lifelong learning. In contrast, virtually all SADs written over the last four years made reference to this as a key objective.

There was also variation in the way key transferable skills were identified in the objectives set by different subjects. In many of the early overview reports, comment was made that only a small minority of institutions referred explicitly to the development of students' transferable skills as an important objective of the provision. As noted above, it soon became the case that all institutions made explicit reference to such skills. Typically, they included the objective of developing students'

communication skills, both oral and written, with an emphasis on presentational skills. Also, providing students with experience of working in teams with the objective of developing their organisational skills and time management were seen as important. Some overview reports drew attention to the way some institutions stressed the importance of developing in students a sense of personal confidence in their ability and encouraging their versatility and adaptability.

Competence in the use of information and communication technology (ICT) was generally seen as a key transferable skill. It was surprising, therefore, that the early subject overview reports revealed a very patchy picture of the extent to which this skill was identified as an objective. In many of these reports there was evidence of reviewers' concerns that the permeation of ICT in the curriculum was generally limited. This position did not last; all institutions and subjects treated the development of students' ICT skills as a key objective. This was reflected in the content of the curriculum, in teaching and learning methods and in student work submitted for assessment.

Conclusion

Throughout the cycle of subject review there were some problems with the clarity of aims and objectives, with some being returned to institutions for amendment. Also in many early reports, reviewers noted overlap between aims and objectives. This was less evident in the later reports, and latterly objectives were usually expressed as intended learning outcomes.

The subject overview reports identified a wide variety of aims across subjects and institutions, reflecting diversity of provision in the range of programmes available and the level of provision from HNC/D to postgraduate courses. In early overview reports there was frequent reference to a significant difference between pre-1992 institutions' focus on aims associated with scholarship and research while, in post-1992 institutions the focus was more often on widening access and transferable skills. Such difference was no longer as prominent in the post-1998 overview reports.

There was evidence, in the recent reports, of far greater prominence given to the development of students' transferable skills, and importantly to ICT skills. Far more frequent reference was also made to the aim of developing students as independent learners with the training to equip them as lifelong learners.

Curriculum design, content and organisation

Introduction

A well-balanced and challenging curriculum was clearly central to the delivery of high-quality programmes and profoundly influenced the quality of the students' learning experience. Curricular design, content and organisation were therefore seen as important matters for scrutiny. The reviewers considered the extent to which research and scholarship, professional requirements and pedagogical developments had been included by subject staff, and whether curricula were successful in preparing students for progression to further study or employment. The judgements made by reviewers concerning the quality of the curriculum were also based on evidence of students' acquisition of knowledge and skills, and evidence of their personal development. In assessing the curriculum, the reviewers identified a number of related factors that, in combination, produced high-quality provision. They looked initially for evidence of an overall strategy or rationale for a programme, which would enable them to understand the basis for its design and content. They sought to confirm that the programmes available to students were set at an appropriate level. They looked for coherence in the curriculum, with an appropriate balance between breadth and depth of treatment so that, as students progressed, they faced more intellectually challenging demands. The reviewers also tested claims made in the SAD on a number of matters, including the degree of flexibility and choice open to students, and claims made by institutions about the interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary nature of the curriculum. Where relevant, they also explored the involvement of professional and accrediting bodies in shaping the design and content of the

curriculum. The soundness of the curriculum was explored through a consideration of the students' knowledge and understanding of the subject and the level of their achievement in acquiring cognitive, subject-specific, generic and transferable skills. Important in ensuring the quality of students' learning, was the extent to which the curriculum was informed by developments in teaching/learning, by recent subject developments, including research and scholarship and where relevant, changes in professional and industrial practice. All of these attributes were seen as fundamental in providing students with the capacities necessary for progression to employment or further study and for their personal development.

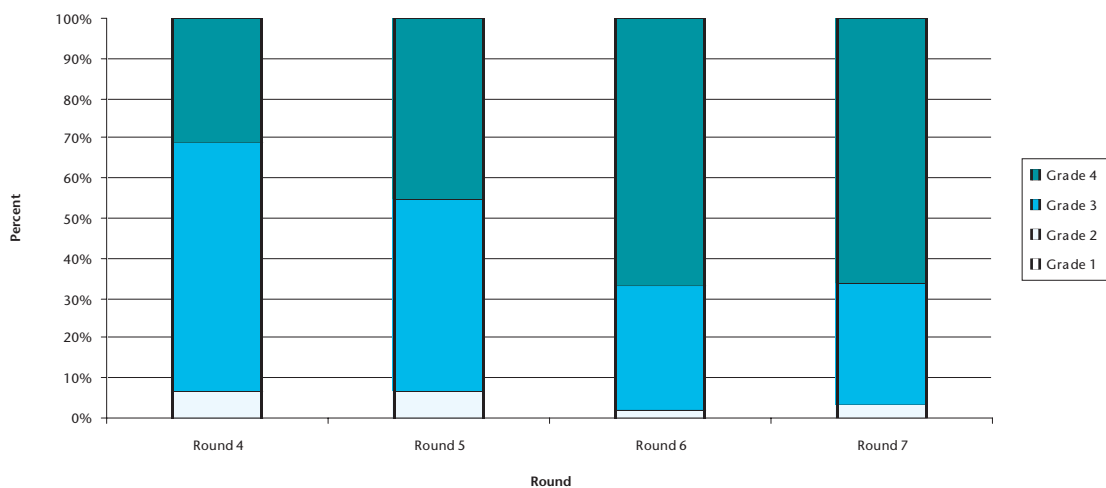
Graded profile of curriculum design, content and organisation by round

The evidence derived from the 1993-95 assessments, and of the 1,914 reviews conducted since 1995, demonstrates that most subject providers were careful to ensure the relevance of the curriculum in meeting student needs. However, the subject overview reports for the 1993-95 round of assessments also made clear that deficiencies in the curriculum led the reviewers to reject some claims for excellence. Also, in the early years of the use of the graded profile, it was rare for more than 50 per cent of providers in a subject under review to achieve a grade 4 in this aspect. In modern languages, for example, only approximately 30 per cent of providers achieved a grade 4, demonstrating that there was either scope for improvement or that significant improvement could be made to the curriculum for the remaining 70 per cent of providers. This was particularly so in Hospitality, Recreation, Sport, Leisure and Tourism (HRSLT) and Business and Management.

For the period 1998-2001, there was a significant increase in the percentage of providers achieving grade 4 for this aspect. In some subjects, this ranged from between 80 to 100 per cent of the institutions reviewed. Also, during that period, most subjects achieved a grade 4 in at least 60 per cent of cases. The notable exceptions to this trend were in Mathematics/Statistics and Operational Research, Medicine, HRSLT and Business and Management. The overview reports also revealed that providers of HE in FECs did significantly less well in this and other aspects of provision. This may explain why some of the above subjects were exceptions to the trend of higher overall grades.

Taking the total review period since 1995 for the curriculum design, content and organisation aspect, 56.2 per cent of the grades awarded were grades 4, 39.4 per cent were grades 3, and 4.3 per cent were grades 2. Only one institution was judged to offer a curriculum so deficient as to merit a grade 1 judgement and that was due to a 'technical infringement' of professional body requirements. There were clear signs of improvement in the general quality of this aspect, with the average grade going up from 3.2 in 1995 to 3.6 in the period 1998-2001, representing a substantial enhancement of provision.

Graded profile for curriculum design, content and organisation by round



Curriculum design and coherence

The reviewers found considerable diversity in the curricula, with most subject teams offering programmes at different levels, as well as catering for students who wished to combine related subjects in one programme of study. The most common provision at undergraduate level was of an Honours degree, offered in a single discipline, in combination or included in an increasing number of modular schemes. Throughout the review period there was also a significant increase in the number of postgraduate programmes available to students. Many institutions also offered sub-degree programmes, particularly in vocational subjects, and some offered foundation or access programmes, although the latter were not included in subject review. It was possible, in some subjects, for students to commence these programmes without prior study of the subject, provided they had appropriate entry qualifications. In contrast, some sub-degree programmes were highly specialised in content.

In every subject, it was important that the links between the aims, the learning objectives and the curricula should be clearly identified. Reviewers, therefore, looked initially for an overarching strategy for the delivery of the programme, derived from the overall aims of the provision and capable of translation into clear learning objectives. In every subject overview report, reference was made to the key features of well-designed curricula with the observation that, in many cases, there was a clear match between the curriculum and the stated aims and objectives. These curricula provided a comprehensive statement of the overall philosophy and rationale for the programme. This usually ensured coherence and provided an explicit framework against which the contribution of individual curriculum elements could be taught and assessed. There was also sound evidence of careful and thorough preparation leading to a well-structured curriculum with clearly identified progression from one level to the next.

On the other hand, reviewers found weaknesses across a range of subjects where subject providers failed to identify an overall strategy or rationale. In many overview reports it was suggested that, in a significant minority of cases, the curricula did not match fully the stated aims and objectives. On a related issue, the reviewers found that there was less of a match between the aims and objectives and the curriculum on combined honours programmes than was the case for single honours schemes.

In a number of reports, it was noted that the rationale for some programmes and pathways, both at undergraduate and postgraduate level, was ambiguous and could be more clearly defined for the benefit of students. On some schemes, including those from a few recent review visits, it was observed that there was a lack of clarity about the relationship between the academic and vocational aims of the curriculum.

It is important to recognise that, in the main, these criticisms related to the early period of subject review. The evidence from the more recent subject overview reports pointed to substantial change, revealing that staff were far more confident in articulating an overall philosophy and rationale for the curriculum, thus enhancing the quality of the students' learning experience to a substantial degree.

It was particularly clear from the evidence provided in many reports, that if the overall aims of the provision were translated into clearly defined learning outcomes, the overall aims were effectively achieved. Furthermore, this evidence suggested that curricular coherence and good understanding on the part of students was more likely to occur, leading to higher attainment levels. However, in many of the early reports there was clear evidence that learning outcomes were rarely defined explicitly for each level.

Since then, overview reports have demonstrated that the overwhelming majority of subject providers employ learning outcomes to articulate the essential features of the curriculum. This development represented a change in emphasis and gave students a clearer indication of what they were expected to achieve and in what they would be assessed. In the judgement of the reviewers, this development clearly enhanced the quality of the learning experience. However, in some recent

reports, the reviewers noted that a few subject providers, particularly in FECs, still used learning outcomes inconsistently across modules, and that learning outcomes were not consistently measured through the assessment process

Breadth and depth of curriculum

In designing the curricula, the key task facing subject teams was to provide sufficient flexibility to allow students choice of coverage of different elements of the subject and yet to impart the body of knowledge and skills appropriate to the final awards made by the institution. In achieving this, staff were guided by the requirements of PSBs. Some subject teams also adopted either an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach to the content of the curriculum.

The coherence of the curricula was promoted by balancing the need for breadth of coverage of the subject with a depth of theoretical treatment. This was usually achieved by requiring students to study a set of core modules dealing with the fundamental concepts, theories and methodology of the discipline. For the most part, these core units were complemented by a number of optional units designed to challenge and stimulate students, enabling them to achieve greater specialisation and increase their depth of knowledge and understanding of the subject. This balance ensured that, as well as acquiring a depth of knowledge and understanding of the subject, students were also equipped with the generic skills of critical awareness, competence in analysis and reflective qualities.

In all subject overview reports, however, there was evidence of reviewers recommending improvements to the content and organisation of the curriculum. These related in the main to the balance between breadth and depth of treatment, deficiencies in the students' acquisition of analytical and critical skills, the extent of choice and the success in developing interdisciplinary programmes.

With respect to the balance of breadth and depth, it was noted that in the attempt to cover all aspects of the discipline, some subject providers had sacrificed depth of treatment, with a consequent loss of intellectual progression. In contrast, in another report it was observed that courses were too narrowly focused and that breadth was sacrificed to a depth of treatment. In other reports it was noted that the curriculum, either at undergraduate or postgraduate level, was overloaded and did not allow students time to reflect on their learning. In the French overview report there was concern that teaching the content of related subjects in French, led to a lack of theoretical depth and challenge to students.

These criticisms were far more prevalent in the early rounds of review visits. In recent reports, the reviewers made far fewer criticisms on this matter and more generally commended the balance achieved between breadth and depth of treatment, and the contribution this made to the quality of learning.

During the cycle of reviews conducted since 1993, a significant structural development was the introduction, throughout the sector, of modular or unit-based schemes of study. They became the predominant means of offering programmes and were designed to satisfy the needs of a larger and more diverse student population. Where the range of modules was appropriate and curricula planned effectively, modular schemes offered the depth of study required for honours degree and postgraduate awards as well as sub-degree qualifications. Throughout the cycle of subject review, reviewers saw excellent examples of modular schemes providing students with a broad range of programmes, offering them wide choice within a flexible curriculum, including opportunities to combine subjects to meet their own needs.

However, in the early rounds of the review process the reviewers identified dangers in redesigning the curricula to fit the new modular structures. In the first set of reports, they expressed serious concerns about the coherence of modular curricula and the balance between breadth and depth of treatment in a range of subjects. In some reports it was noted that pathways of study were not clearly defined with the danger of fragmentation in the curriculum. Of particular concern here, was the failure to specify the prerequisites or corequisites necessary for intellectual progression, the lack

of intellectual challenge, and the integrity of the subject at degree level. In vocational programmes, reviewers saw problems in reconciling the demands of a professionally driven curriculum with the flexibility and choice available in modular schemes. In particular, they pointed to tendency to present an array of modules and then expect inexperienced students to make the integrative links between modules for themselves. This was prevalent in a number of courses. Despite these earlier concerns in reports published after 1996, the reviewers made very few references to these problems. Indeed, since that time, the picture was far more positive, with frequent comments concerning the success of modular structures in offering an intellectually challenging curriculum. It was clear that subject staff used the modular framework to achieve a balance between breadth and depth of coverage, and developed students' subject knowledge to a high level, as well as providing students with appropriate generic skills. This represented a substantial change in the coherence of curricula offered to students, and enhanced the quality of their learning.

A number of subject teams claimed that they were offering an interdisciplinary approach in their programmes. However, in a number of reports it was clear that the reviewers found little evidence to support such claims. In one overview report reference was made to a number of institutions claiming that their curricula integrated disparate material from different disciplines. However, in 60 per cent of cases, reviewers found that the provision was multidisciplinary with little integration and, as such, failed to produce graduates with skills of interrelating material from across the range of disciplines studies. In some reports it was also noted that opportunities for interdisciplinary work were missed in programmes where a greater degree of integration between cognate subjects would enhance students' education. In other reports, the reviewers noted that coherence and progression was not fully achieved because students received insufficient grounding in methodology for them to respond to the challenges of an interdisciplinary approach.

Critical and analytical skills

The ability of students to explore the constituent parts of a discipline in detail in order to identify their essential features and relationships is an important skill at degree level study. Also, at this level students are expected to develop their capacity to question and confront the key theoretical and conceptual assumptions of the discipline and understand contested approaches to the discipline. There were frequent references, particularly in early reports, to the curriculum failing to develop these critical and analytical skills to a satisfactory level. In some instances reviewers identified an insufficient treatment of core theory, others stated that theoretical frameworks were insufficiently rigorous and did little to promote critical awareness. There was also a concern that theoretical and conceptual frameworks were not sufficiently differentiated between levels of study, particularly between levels 2 and 3. In the recent Philosophy overview report, a small number of providers made no distinction between level 2 and 3 modules, putting at risk intellectual progression and the development of critical and analytical skills. In some reports, the reviewers identified insufficient analytical and critical depth in the curriculum. Again, it should be emphasised that, with a few exceptions, most of these concerns relate to early assessments/reviews. The overwhelming evidence from reports published since 1998 demonstrated that curricula develop students' analytical and critical skills to a high level, improving the overall quality of their learning experience, and contributed significantly to a sense of graduate status.

In a number of reports, reference was made to subject teams not paying sufficient attention to methodology and research skills at undergraduate level. In the Sociology overview report, deficiency in this aspect of the curriculum was seen as the main reason why institutions were not making a full contribution to the attainment of their aims and objectives

Student choice

The reviewers found that, for many students, one of the main attractions of studying at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels was the opportunity to select from a range of options or electives. In making choices within a flexible curriculum, students were able to tailor their

programme of study to suit their own interests and needs. All the reports identified this feature as an important strength of the HE system and much valued by students. It was rare to find any programme that offered students no choice of options. In the vast majority of cases, where choice was available, it was also rare to find programmes that offered students complete freedom to select all the modules they wished to study. Curricula usually prescribed a diet of core modules that students must take to achieve the award. Typically, the core area was studied in the first two years of programmes, freeing up choice in the final year.

There were, however, additional constraints on the flexibility and degree of choice available to students. These occurred in circumstances where the provision was small, with too few staff to teach a range of options. Some reports noted that when a module reflected the research interests of a member of staff, in the absence of that member, the option was no longer available, and that this was to the detriment of the students' learning experience. In some reports it was also noted that the process of accreditation constrained curriculum flexibility and, consequently, the extent of option choice available to students. Despite these constraints, the reviewers found that, in most subjects, the development of modular programmes had increased the opportunities for students to select from an enlarged pool of optional modules.

Transferable skills

The reviewers found that, with respect to their previous academic experience and achievements, students entering HE came from diverse backgrounds. Throughout the review period, students experienced a rapidly changing employment market, with employers making new demands on the range and type of skills that they expected their employees to possess. In dealing with these changes, the reviewers found increasingly that, in the majority of subjects, institutions had planned the acquisition of the skills relevant to employment and the students' capacity for lifelong learning in a more coherent fashion. Subject teams generally recognised the importance of aligning transferable skills with the specialist skills traditionally developed within subjects. The reviewers found that transferable skills were included in the content of the curriculum in the vast majority of subjects. They included communication, presentational, debating, numerical, interpretative and information technology (IT) skills. These skills also benefited students in developing and acquiring the related skills of problem-solving, teamworking, independent learning and information gathering. The reviewers saw this as an important development, given that preparation for a lifetime involving several changes of employment was becoming increasingly important for many students.

However, the good practice identified above was not so well developed in many institutions prior to 1998. The overview reports up to 1998 pointed to a varied treatment of transferable skills across subjects and institutions. In some reports, it was suggested that transferable skills were not embedded in the curriculum and that, in particular, there was very limited treatment of ICT skills. These reports indicated that in some institutions there was a sound treatment of transferable skills, but the reviewers confirmed that the dominant pattern was one of patchy provision overall.

In some of the early reports, the reviewers noted that although transferable skills were not made explicit in the curriculum, some subject teams claimed they were intrinsic to the curriculum. In other reports it was suggested that the requirement that students undertake final-year project work and/or submit a dissertation was a means of promoting transferable skills. In a similar fashion, many reports pointed to student placement in industry, fieldwork or a period overseas as an important vehicle for developing such skills. However, in the same reports, the reviewers observed that these learning activities to be achieved were frequently not made explicit or always embedded in the curriculum.

Although identifying some occasional weakness in the development of transferable skills, the reviewers in the two later rounds of review visits pointed to the systematic and coherent treatment of transferable skills in all subjects. In contrast to reports in the earlier period, it was clear that transferable skills were made explicit and embedded in the curriculum. There was also clear evidence that these skills were increasingly mapped across modules for assessment purposes, and closely monitored. The reviewers found this to be one of the most significant developments in the

design and content of the curriculum, ensuring that all students acquired competence in these skills, thus, substantially improving the quality of their learning experience and their employability.

Staff scholarship and research

In every subject overview report, the reviewers pointed to the significance of staff expertise informing the development of the curriculum and in ensuring its currency. The impact of staff research, scholarship, consultancy and professional practice was relevant throughout the curricula, and was particularly evident in the final year of undergraduate programmes and at postgraduate level. In the early reviews, some reports indicated that an overall judgement of excellence was linked closely to the considerable success in channelling active scholarship and research into teaching. It was clear to the reviewers that the student experience was greatly enriched by this integration of research into the curriculum. However, in a few reports some caution about the impact of research on the curriculum was noted, in that too great an emphasis on research-based courses may limit the breadth of the curriculum. Some of the earlier reports identified differences in the emphasis given to research by the older universities and the new universities. It is clear from the sample of the seven institutions, that the pre-1992 universities stressed the contribution of research, claiming that, within the subject curriculum, 'teaching and research are inseparable activities'. In contrast, the post-1992 institutions tended to stress the impact of the institutions' overall staff development and research policies informing the development of the curriculum where appropriate.

However, this distinction rarely featured as an issue in the majority of reports published after 1998. The impact of staff scholarship and research was still seen as crucial in ensuring the currency of the curriculum in both types of institutions. However, some reviewers suggested that the curricula in some FECs could have been strengthened by the involvement of staff in research activity (HLRST).

The professions and industry

Many reports made frequent reference to the impact of staff consultancy and professional practice in the provision of an up-to-date curriculum. In the vast majority of reports, the reviewers pointed to the generally beneficial input to curricula from the activities of a wide range of external stakeholders, especially in vocational subjects. For many subjects leading to professional qualifications, there was a close relationship with a PSB involving an accreditation and review process. This usually required scrutiny of the curriculum to ensure its currency in meeting changing professional circumstances. The reviewers identified a number of examples of modifications to the curriculum as a consequence of accreditation and review,

Occasionally, however, the close involvement of a PSB led reviewers to the view that the design and content of the curriculum was unduly constrained.

The reviewers also found that where there was a formally constituted advisory board or committee, industrial and commercial practice also exerted an influence on curricular content, ensuring currency and relevance. In many reports, reference was made to the contribution of employers and professionals on advisory bodies. They were able to acquaint providers with developments in the local and regional employment market, advice on student placements and the skills required of graduates. As a direct consequence of their involvement, there was evidence of employers making resources available to students doing project work, and providing additional facilities within the institution. There was also increased evidence of employer involvement on courses that did not have a direct vocational focus.

Given the importance of such arrangements to the content of curricula, the reviewers in a number of subjects expressed concern that many institutions either did not have formal arrangements for liaison with employers or that, where these existed, the links were minimal. This led to a frequent recommendation that such arrangements should be implemented to enhance the quality of the student experience

Conclusion

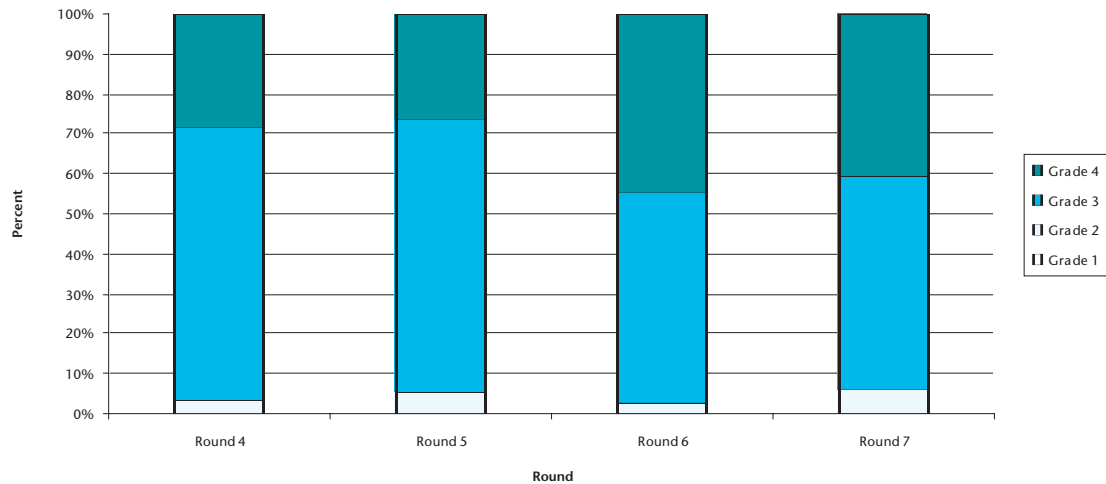
The organisation of the curriculum exerts considerable influence on the methods of delivery used by academic staff. Subject providers have become much better at planning curricular content and presenting high-quality curricula for their students. The main changes to the student experience related to curriculum design, content and organisation observed during the review cycle have been the increasing frequency of clear strategies for curricular design, and closer relationships between curricular content and the aims and objectives, with the latter now expressed typically as learning outcomes and differentiated according to level. There was increased flexibility of curricular organisation and greater attention paid to subject, generic and transferable skills.

The above represents considerable achievements by institutions. There were, however, areas where further progress was identified as desirable. Not all institutions defined learning outcomes and used them in ways that enabled students to have a clear view of what is expected of them at each level. There was evidence that some providers did not develop students' analytical and critical skills to a sufficiently high level. Although transferable skills were usually embedded in the curriculum, they were not always systematically mapped across modules in a consistent manner, or always explicitly assessed. The currency of the curriculum could have been strengthened in a number of institutions by closer links with local/regional employers.

Teaching, learning and assessment

Introduction

In assessing the quality of the students' learning experience, the reviewers explored the extent to which institutions had developed strategies for teaching, learning and assessment. They examined the way that these activities fitted the intended learning outcomes. Of particular concern to the reviewers was how the teaching and learning methods employed enabled students to acquire knowledge and understanding of their chosen subject, as well as the acquisition of subject-specific, analytical and transferable skills. This involved a review of the range, fitness for purpose, and quality of the teaching, learning and assessment methods employed, and the extent to which these methods developed students' capacity for independent learning. Between 1993 and 1998, the teaching sessions observed by the reviewers were graded in order to measure the extent to which the teaching successfully achieved the stated aims and objectives for the session. However, as part of the reforms introduced in 1998, it was decided that the specific grading of this element of the student experience should be abandoned, and that in future the reviewers would devote more of their time to the scrutiny of students' assessed work. Consequently, there was a gradual reduction in the average number of teaching sessions observed, and a more even distribution of the reviewers' time between this activity and the scrutiny of student work. Finally, the reviewers examined the extent to which assessment methods were systematically designed for testing students' achievement of the aims, objectives and learning outcomes. They looked for the articulation and implementation of clear assessment strategies, the effectiveness and equity of marking and moderation systems, and the quality of feedback provided to students on their work.

Graded profile for teaching, learning and assessment by round 1995 - 2001

Throughout the nine-year cycle of subject review, teaching, learning and assessment usually achieved the lowest percentage of grades 4 of all the six aspects of provision, except in 1998-2000, when the quality management and enhancement aspect was marginally lower. However, because this aspect covered a wide spectrum of complex activities with so many different elements, it was difficult for reviewers not to identify some scope for improvement. The issues identified by the reviewers related, in the main, to deficiencies in assessment practices, rather than to weaknesses in teaching and learning. The grades awarded by reviewers to individual teaching sessions throughout the period 1995-1998 were noticeably higher than the average grade they awarded to the aspect as a whole.

Teaching and learning strategy

In the early reports, there was little evidence of overarching strategies for teaching and learning. In most subjects, teaching methods were based essentially on successful custom and practice. Staff usually enjoyed considerable autonomy in the choice of teaching methods they employed. The reviewers noted that there was little attempt to coordinate the diverse interests of individual lecturers. The reliance on custom and practice, and the absence of a clear strategy, led some review teams to conclude that development in introducing a wider range of teaching and learning approaches was limited. In some examples, the reviewers saw this as diminishing the quality of education received by students.

In early reports, the reviewers also identified the need for teaching and learning methods to be more closely related to the stated aims and objectives for the provision. In 1994-95, the reviewers saw some provision in Geography as a model of good practice, which ensured that teaching and learning was matched closely to aims and objectives, including those related to the acquisition of transferable skills. By 1995-96, most subjects had attempted to establish a clear relationship between aims and objectives and teaching methods, although in modern languages this was less successful in relation to the use of the target language in teaching contextual modules.

Imaginative approaches to teaching and learning, enabling students to understand all of the intended aims and objectives were apparent from the outset of the subject review cycle. Reviewers cited the introduction of enquiry and action learning, a highly systematic group activity, giving students responsibility for their learning as a particularly interesting example.

Reviewers sometimes noted that the Enterprise in Higher Education initiative (EHE) was beginning to produce a more systematic approach to the teaching of transferable skills. However, a recurring

theme identified by reviewers in most subjects was that, in the absence of appropriate structures, such innovations were rarely disseminated to colleagues operating within the same subject or institution. Reviewers frequently observed that this limited the opportunities for enhancing the quality of the students' learning experience.

In reports published for the 1996-98 round of visits, the reviewers noted a marked improvement in most subjects in the way that links between aims and objectives and teaching methods were articulated. An important factor driving this development was that many more institutions established learning and teaching committees at the subject level. These provided an opportunity for staff and, in some cases, students, to reflect collectively on the best methods of delivering teaching and creating a strong learning environment. The reviewers found that institutions were providing teaching and learning strategies that were usually well articulated for the benefit of staff and students. The reviewers also found that, for most subjects, in the majority of institutions teaching and learning was increasingly designed to facilitate the effective achievement of aims and objectives.

Development continued into the later rounds of review visits, with the documentation of detailed learning outcomes providing students with a realistic picture of what they were expected to achieve. Learning outcomes also identified clearly the transferable skills students were expected to acquire. The reviewers also noted that these more systematic approaches enabled institutions to cope with an increasingly diverse student population more effectively.

Although in the later subject overview reports there were well-documented indicators of substantial improvement, there was still evidence in some reports of scope for further improvement. In Business and Management, the reviewers noted that in 10 per cent of cases, mainly in FECs, there was a lack of clarity in overall teaching strategies. However, a different picture was evident to reviewers in Art and Design who pointed to a convergence between HEIs and FECs in the development of teaching strategies and to the overall grade awarded to this aspect. Also, there was still evidence that, in some institutions, the teaching and learning methods employed were not always matched to the aims and objectives of the provision. Despite this, the overall picture to emerge from the later round of visits was that the preparation of well-documented strategies and the clarity of learning outcomes in all subjects had become the norm.

Teaching methods

The vast majority of subjects offered an appropriate variety of teaching methods. These usually included lectures and seminars. Most subjects also included some type of practical class, workshop or laboratory-based activities; in others, this was the dominant activity. Industrial visits and/or fieldwork were standard practice in a range of subjects such as Archaeology, Building, Environmental Studies and Materials Technology.

The reviewers commented on the wider range of teaching/learning methods employed across most subjects. This had not always been the case, however, and in a number of early reports the reviewers pointed to an over-reliance on the use of lectures, with students in class for lengthy periods. They frequently observed that staff were too concerned to impart a body of factual knowledge to their students, rather than to stimulate their intellectual curiosity. However, even in this early period, the reviewers identified a number of exciting innovations in the teaching and learning methods employed. These included, in Geography, the use of group poster sessions and the encouragement of students' independent learning.

The reviewers identified many examples of increasingly innovative practice, such as live projects and case-studies, paired work, including peer tutoring, student-led seminars and, in some cases, tutor-less tutorials and role plays. These frequently involved simulations of professional practice, such as mock public inquiries in Town and Country Planning and Landscape, and Civil Engineering and could involve whole days for activities such as newspaper production in Communication and Media Studies. It is clear from reports later in the subject review cycle that the reviewers saw

evidence of considerable innovation in the learning opportunities available to students, enhancing the overall quality of their learning. However, despite these innovations, an over-reliance on lectures was noted in a minority of cases, even in the most recent reports.

In a few of the early subject overview reports, there was evidence of some limited development in the use of computer-aided learning (CAL). However, in the most recent round of reports, the reviewers found clear evidence of considerable use made of CAL, either in the provision of tailored software packages, or in the use of the internet, where internet-based virtual-learning environments were making effective contributions to the learning process. In many cases, reviewers concluded that these developments significantly enhanced the quality of the students' learning experience.

In laboratory sessions in a number of science-based subjects, students experienced an excellent range of techniques by hands-on use of equipment and by interactive and non-interactive use of CAL packages and videos. CAL packages were also common in other subjects, such as Dentistry and Mathematics, Statistics and Operational Research.

Teaching quality

Throughout the review period, the reviewers frequently concluded that students experienced high-quality teaching provided by committed and dedicated staff. During the period when individual teaching sessions were graded (1995-1998), it was rare for more than 5 per cent of these sessions to be graded as less than satisfactory. Also of interest was the fact that the percentage of grades 4 for individual teaching sessions was always far greater than the percentage of grades 4 awarded to teaching, learning and assessment as a whole.

In the delivery of lectures, the most prominent features of good practice included clear objectives and the effective planning and organisation of stimulating and challenging content. In the best sessions the reviewers observed highly committed, enthusiastic and approachable staff employing a variety of approaches, including the increased use of sophisticated IT and audiovisual aids. Often the current research and scholarship of staff, as well as their expertise, including relevant professional experience, was fully integrated into the subject matter. In every subject, the reviewers identified many examples where teaching made appropriate intellectual demands of students.

Where teaching was not making a full contribution to the stated objectives, the reviewers pointed to lecture content that added little to what students had already received in handouts or was available in standard texts. Occasionally the reviewers observed that students were doing little more than taking copious notes during a lecture. In all overview reports, there was reference to the content of some lectures not providing a sufficient intellectual challenge to students. There were a few examples of lecturers who did not appear to be in command of the subject content and of using unnecessarily complex or dated material.

Over the review period the rapid increase in student numbers created difficulty for institutions in sustaining small-group seminar teaching. This usually led either to an increase in the number of students in a group, or to less frequent meetings of the group. Despite these changes, the reviewers in every subject pointed to the role of seminars as enhancing the quality of the students' learning experience. They provided students with regular opportunities to develop their communication skills through peer discussion of complex issues and in making formal presentations.

In the best seminar sessions, the reviewers noted that staff designed clear tasks to be undertaken by students. Students came to the session well prepared and were able to take a lead in discussions with colleagues, constructing a highly interactive and stimulating learning environment. The reviewers increasingly identified these positive features of seminar work in many subjects. However, the reviewers continued to note cases where the sessions were not carefully planned, where tutors exercised too much control and where students had not prepared adequately or were absent, thus limiting opportunities for participation in group discussion. Given these weaknesses it was not

surprising that, in most early reports, the reviewers saw the need for more systematic mechanisms to identify and disseminate good teaching practice. However, the published reports on the last two rounds of visits indicated clearly that there was widespread dissemination of good practice, including peer observation of teaching. In these reports, there were very few references to the poor teaching practice identified in earlier reports. The main message conveyed by the reviewers is of innovation in teaching and learning that they felt significantly enhanced the quality of the students' learning experience.

Across a wide range of subjects the reviewers noted a number of other significant developments enhancing the quality of the students' learning experience. There were examples of professional practitioners and visiting academics, often of national or international renown, teaching alongside the subject staff. Those with professional experience were able to demonstrate the application of highly specialist skills, or share with students their own cutting-edge experience of professional life. In the more academic subjects, students benefited from the insight provided by academics at the forefront of research.

In other subjects, the reviewers noted excellent practice in the use of experiential teaching methods and active and evidence-based learning. This was evident in some of the subjects assessed in earlier rounds, but was far more widespread in the final years of the review cycle. Greater attention was given to problem-based learning and of using students' experience of practice in formal teaching sessions.

Learning

Throughout the review process, the reviewers identified a major shift in focus towards the development of students' independent learning. In the first round of visits, the reviewers noted that only a few institutions were developing their students' capabilities for independent learning. Initially there was no agreed definition of independent learning and sometimes it was understood to mean no more than the work normally done by students in preparation for essay writing or in making seminar presentations. In recent years, it has been taken to mean more than this, involving an altogether more structured set of activities.

These different approaches to independent learning were clearly evident in some of the early reports. The reviewers noted that the work done by students in preparation for seminars was treated as independent learning in a number of subjects. However, even in the early reports, the reviewers drew attention to evidence of more structured approaches. In History, for example, the reviewers noted that in about 20 per cent of examples, institutions were using Personal Records of Achievement, learning contracts and negotiated assessment. In subjects such as Geography and Music, there was a small but growing use of well-designed self-learning packages, and in Modern Languages the development of autonomous student-centred learning was described as a feature of some provision. The reviewers also saw evidence of some significant innovation in the development of carefully structured open and distance-learning packages. For example, students had access to high-quality distance-learning materials and other independent learning aids, including ICT support.

However, in most subjects reviewed between 1993-96, the reviewers found little direct evidence that the means of developing and supporting independent learning were being fully addressed. In Iberian Studies, for example, they noted that there was a need to ensure that students have thoroughly developed schemes of work for a particular piece of independent learning, including setting out its rationale and relationship to the programme of study in general. These reservations were reinforced by the limited development of resources to support student-centred learning, even in Computer Science, where the reviewers observed that there was a disappointing and restricted use of IT to support student learning.

Effective strategies for developing students' independent learning became more prevalent in reports from 1996 onwards. In Dance, Drama and Cinematics, a culture of independent and collaborative learning was fostered through the use of logs and journals, encouraging students to reflect critically

on their progress. In Art and Design, a clear strength of the provision was the development of students' independent learning skills, sometimes formulated through individually negotiated learning agreements.

In virtually all reports published since 1998, the reviewers found clear evidence of significant innovation and progress in the development of independent learning. The reviewers found that in many more institutions, across all subjects, there was an expectation that students assumed greater responsibility for their learning. This was developed systematically through the use of learning contracts, students keeping logs of their achievements and producing portfolios of skills' attainment. In most subjects, the reviewers concluded that these developments significantly enhanced the overall quality of student learning.

Throughout this period, the opportunity for students to develop the skills necessary for independent learning was also provided by the requirement, in most subjects, for final-year honours students to complete a dissertation or major project. Typically this would involve students gaining experience of research methods and either engaging in research activity or conducting literature searches to achieve a synthesis of this literature.

Also, the reviewers found that the opportunity to engage in some form of work experience, placement or period of study abroad or in the UK contributed greatly to students' acquisition of independent learning skills. Reports in some subjects not only underline the positive impact of a sandwich year on student acquisition of a variety of transferable skills, but also identified excellent examples of student-managed project work, often planned and carried out in collaboration with employers.

Assessment

In general, the reviewers found the quality of assessment practices to be limited in many respects. The following quotation from the overview report for Land and Property Management is not atypical:

The single intervention by universities and colleges that would improve the quality of the student experience would be the improvement of assessment practices.

In all subjects, the reviewers saw examples of excellent assessment practices. In many institutions they identified sound assessment strategies that offered a variety of assessment methods and were well matched to the stated aims and objectives. They saw innovations designed to assess the different competencies of students. In the best examples, there were clear assessment criteria and grade descriptors that were widely available and understood by students. The reviewers also saw many examples of meticulous and fair marking that was subject to careful moderation, together with excellent formative feedback to students. However, the coherent development and systematic implementation of such strategies was still a problem in some institutions and in many of the subjects reviewed between 1996-2000.

Particularly in the first round of visits, reviewers commented frequently on the narrow range of assessment methods employed, suggesting that an over-reliance on examinations did not allow students to demonstrate their achievement of all learning outcomes. Although there had been clear development in this area, in recent review visits, the reviewers continued to point to the narrow range of assessment methods employed in a number of institutions.

Related to the narrowness of assessment methods, was the concern expressed by the reviewers that assessment tasks did not always constitute an adequate intellectual challenge. This reflected a lack of rigour, often resulting from a failure to distinguish appropriately between the intellectual demands required at different levels of study. This problem was occasionally exacerbated by questions seeking only the recall of information and knowledge, rather than higher-level cognitive skills such as analysis and understanding. In a few reports, the reviewers were concerned that assessment tasks, including examination questions, were repeated from year to year. The above criticisms were found mainly in the reports from the early rounds of review visits. In more recent

reports, the reviewers identified a substantial increase in the amount of coursework submitted by students for assessment. The reviewers also saw examples of innovative practices, some of which were designed to test students' attainment of transferable skills. In addition to the assessment of projects and dissertations, the reviewers saw assessment of student group work in relation to case studies and other problem-solving activities. In some of these activities, the reviewers noted that the assessment task could take the form of conference-style, video-recorded presentations.

In the most recent rounds of visits, the reviewers saw evidence of an increased use of self, peer and group assessment in many subjects. Imaginative approaches to the assessment of professional competencies included the production of skills videos, and the use of Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCE) in Dentistry and in Pharmacology and Pharmacy. These developments involved the assessment of a wider range of students' learning activities.

In the early rounds of reviews, the reviewers commented frequently on the absence of assessment criteria. Although there was some good practice in Geography, in most other subjects reviewed between 1993 and 1998 assessment criteria were significantly lacking. Where they existed, the reviewers found them to be inadequate in a number of respects. The reviewers noted that assessment criteria were not clearly understood by students, they were inconsistently applied, and not always linked to the stated aims and objectives. The reviewers saw this as detrimental to the quality of the students' learning experience, because students were unclear on how they could improve their performance. From 1998 onwards, there was clear evidence that an increased focus on this issue had led to improvements, although there were still concerns over the failure, in a number of cases, to link assessment criteria directly to subject-specific learning outcomes. Early reports contained very little reference to the quality of marking, or to internal and external moderation procedures, although some examples of good practice were cited in relation to the double, blind and anonymous marking of examination scripts. In later reports, the reviewers generally described marking as conscientious and fair, although it often was clear to the reviewers that there was still scope for ensuring greater consistency in the way that moderation procedures were implemented. The reviewers also had concerns about the extent to which double, blind and anonymous-marking of students' assessed work was carried out. In all subjects, the reviewers commented that the feedback given by staff on students' assessed work was a vital factor in enabling students to understand what they needed to do in order to improve their performance and fully achieve the learning outcomes. The reviewers in all subjects saw evidence of good feedback practice. In most subjects, in many institutions, there was evidence that student work was returned promptly and accompanied by detailed and constructive written feedback. This was increasingly provided on a standard cover sheet as part of a clearly articulated policy, requiring that feedback be related specifically to assessment criteria. However, in the vast majority of subjects, the reviewers found it necessary to comment on the failure of a significant number of institutions to provide adequate feedback on students' work.

Even in the most recent rounds of subject review, the published reports demonstrated that there was considerable scope for further development in this area. In a substantial number of cases, feedback on students' work could be more extensive and appropriate. Feedback was sometimes subject to prolonged delay, and annotated comments were often perfunctory. Such practice was seen as undermining the principal purpose of providing feedback to promote students' learning.

Despite the evidence of developments in assessment strategies and practices, the reviewers, even in the later round of visits, saw this as the area most in need of further consideration by institutions. They identified an over-dependence on testing students' factual knowledge rather than their capacity for critical analysis. Also, the use of examination questions that were either insufficiently challenging or were too similar to previously completed coursework assignments was identified. The reviewers also found similarities persisting in the examination questions set from year to year, despite repeated comments on this failing from external examiners.

In the most recent visits, the reviewers saw evidence of a failure to establish, and to communicate and consistently apply grade descriptors and marking criteria. Even when these existed, the reviewers noted that they were not always matched to the intended learning outcomes and did not permit students to demonstrate their full achievement. The reviewers also saw a significant minority of cases where the marks awarded were not consistent with the marking criteria. Such weakness was compounded by failings in the moderation systems. In a number of examples, the reviewers saw only limited use made of anonymous-marking and the practice of double-marking. Where double-marking occurred, the reviewers saw many cases of inadequate mechanisms for reconciling marks between the first and second marker. A number of reports called for improved record keeping by staff to demonstrate that the moderation of student work had occurred.

Finally, in every subject overview report for the two final rounds of visits, the reviewers identified deficiencies in the feedback given to students. These deficiencies echoed those made at the commencement of the review process and included the perfunctory nature of feedback, the absence of constructive comment, particularly for weaker students, and the failure to make timely comment so that students could improve their subsequent performance.

Conclusion

In terms of teaching, learning and assessment, the main change to the quality of the student learning experience was the development of clear strategies for teaching and learning. This led to far greater clarity in defining learning outcomes and in ensuring that these matched the teaching and learning methods employed. In developing these strategies, it was evident to the reviewers, in every subject, that this led to significant innovation, including much greater variety in the teaching and learning methods employed, including extensive use of IT resources.

During the review period, there was a substantial increase in student numbers admitted to HE. Despite the added pressures created by this increase, including the need to deal with students recruited from more diverse backgrounds, the reviewers pointed to high-quality teaching being sustained over the period, reflecting great credit on teachers in all subjects. It was also clear that the establishment of learning and teaching committees ensured a much wider dissemination of good teaching practice.

A related development concerned the support and encouragement given to students' independent learning. At the beginning of the review cycle, there was some development in this area, but the general picture was of quite limited innovation. The evidence seen by the reviewers in the later rounds of visits pointed to substantial improvement in developing systems for students to take greater responsibility for their learning.

In all subjects, the reviewers noted clear evidence of innovation, with a far wider range of assessment methods employed, and assessment of a broader variety of skills. The reviewers also saw evidence that students were better informed about assessment criteria and were likely to receive sound feedback on their work.

These are real achievements, pointing generally to the sound quality in this aspect of provision. However, even in the most recent round of visits, the reviewers identified areas where there was clearly scope for improvement. They found that some providers did not have well defined strategies for teaching and learning. There were still examples of an over-reliance on teaching methods, which did not encourage student involvement in their learning.

Reviewers in later rounds also saw evidence of a lack of coherence in assessment strategies, together with a lack of clarity in defining learning outcomes and assessment criteria. There was also evidence of assessment methods not well matched to learning outcomes and, as such, not assessing the full range of skills acquired by students. Finally, in later subject overview reports there were concerns about the quality of feedback provided on students' assessed work.

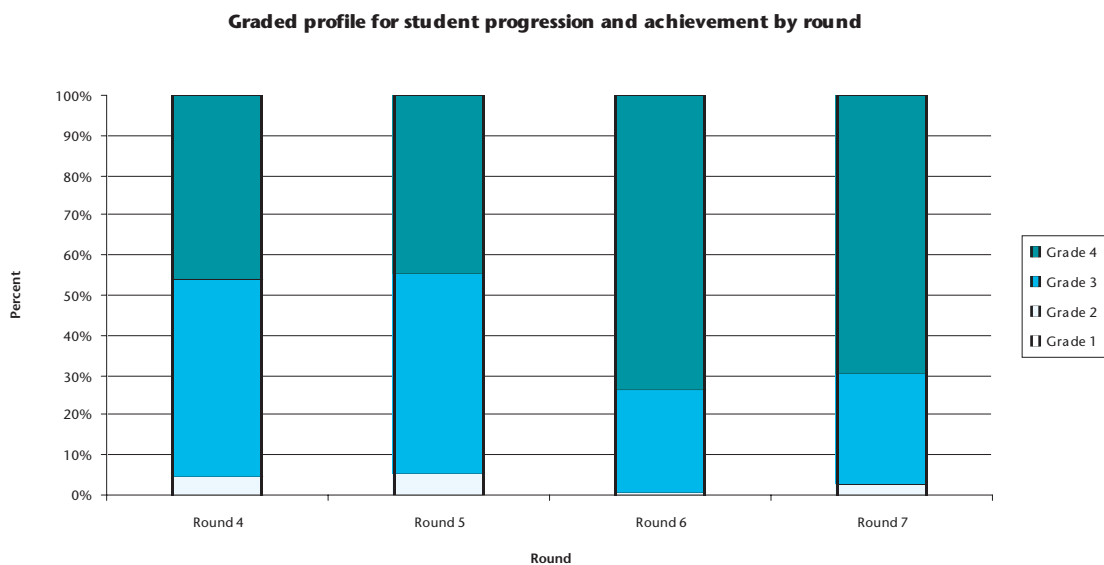
Student progression and achievement

Introduction

In reviewing the quality of the students' learning experience, the reviewers explored the recruitment policies of providers to ensure that these matched the stated aims and objectives. From this base, they analysed progression and completion rates and the distribution of qualifications awarded to students. A significant feature of the reviewers' work was to scrutinise the assessed work of students, gathering evidence of their attainment of the intended learning outcomes. Finally, the reviewers would look for evidence from external examiners' reports and, where appropriate, the comments of other external agencies, including employers, of overall students' achievements and their suitability for employment.

Graded profile for student progression and achievement by round

In general, reviewers were very positive in their judgements of this student progression and achievement aspect. In many subjects a majority of providers received a grade 4. However, the percentage of grades 4 awarded ranged from 29 per cent in Materials Technology to 100 per cent in Veterinary Medicine, albeit a subject with only four providers. In some subjects a significant minority of providers were awarded grade 2, a notable example being General Engineering where, for 20 per cent of providers, reviewers judged that there was scope for significant improvement.



In those instances where the reviewers awarded grades 3 or 2, the main reasons were usually related to deficiencies in progression and completion rates, or the inadequate attainment by students of the stated objectives with respect to the acquisition of subject knowledge and related skills. In the last two rounds of visits, the reviewers identified far fewer examples of these deficiencies.

General features

A common problem, identified by reviewers in a majority of subjects, concerned the reliability and validity of the statistical data made available in SADs or during a visit. In the best, there were transparent systems in place for monitoring and tracking student progress and attainment from entry to first career destination. This included reliable data on entry qualifications and progression between levels, with detailed analysis of withdrawal, transfer and failure rates as well as reliable information on first career destinations.

Such good practice was not widespread, and accurate quantitative information was not always available. Of particular concern to the reviewers, in a number of subjects, was the difficulty experienced by subject teams in communicating precisely how many students had withdrawn from, transferred from or failed a course. Often they were most evident in the large modular programmes offered by an increasing number of institutions. These difficulties were also evident on programmes where the stated aim was to broaden access to HE. This led the reviewers to question how the progress of students experiencing difficulties with their studies was being tracked. However, in the most recent round of visits, the reviewers saw less evidence of these difficulties, noting that students could be more confident about the reliability of systems for recording and monitoring their progress.

Application rates and demand

Reviewers saw evidence of wide variations in the number of applications to places ratio, depending on the subject and type of institution. In almost every subject there was evidence that pre-1992 universities received a higher number of applicants for each place than was the case for the post-1992 institutions. However, during a period that saw a substantial increase in the overall number of students entering HE, it was not surprising that, for most subjects, the reviewers identified buoyant demand. This was apparent in subjects across the arts, engineering, humanities, social sciences and life sciences.

However, the reviewers noted exceptions to this trend, with some subjects experiencing difficulties in meeting target numbers. In modern languages, for example, the reviewers found that some institutions struggled to remain viable in the provision of single honours programmes in French and German. To cope with the decline in student numbers, some institutions had sought to offer these languages in combination with other subjects, or to pioneer institution-wide introductory optional courses in these languages.

The reviewers also saw examples of a decline in the number of applications made by GCE A-Level students for entry to programmes in mechanical engineering, land and property management, environmental studies and building. In some reports, this fall was attributed to the decline in manufacturing industry, and to the recession in the construction industry. However, this did not necessarily lead to a reduction in the number of students enrolled because of the use made by institutions of alternative recruitment strategies. These included the provision of access courses, franchise arrangements, admitting students with a HNC/D direct to the second year of programmes and, in some examples, relaxing entry qualifications.

In most other subjects, institutions experienced little difficulty in recruiting to target numbers from a pool of highly qualified applicants. In some subjects, such as Veterinary Medicine, Dentistry and Medicine there was a very heavy demand for places, with the application to place ratio as high as 27:1.

Student entry profiles

The reviewers found increasing diversity in the backgrounds of students admitted to HE. In many respects, the student population in 2001 was more diverse than was the case in 1992. This reflected differences in the type of entry qualifications, age, gender and ethnicity of applicants. With respect to entry qualifications, the diversity identified by the reviewers was related directly to the aims and objectives that institutions set for themselves. In the vast majority of SADs, institutions made explicit the type of entry qualifications they expected successful candidates to possess.

It was clear from the evidence of individual subject review reports and from the subject overview reports that the reviewers identified two broad trends, reflecting differences in emphasis and focus between the older and newer universities. In the older universities, the emphasis was on the recruitment of high-quality students who possessed very high GCE A-Level grades or equivalent qualifications. This was a feature of these institutions from the assessment of law in 1993 to the review of philosophy in 2000-01.

In contrast, from the beginning of the review process, it was apparent that post-1992 institutions placed greater emphasis on the need to broaden the basis of recruitment by targeting those groups traditionally under-represented in HE. A variety of means was employed to widen access to such groups. These included the development of access courses, foundation years and franchising the early years of undergraduate programmes to FECs. The reviewers also noted that these institutions accepted candidates with far lower GCE A-Level points compared to the other institutions, and were more likely to admit students on the basis of accredited prior (experiential) learning (AP(E)L). The success of these students in attaining degree qualifications was seen by the reviewers as evidence of considerable added-value, given the level of their entry qualifications.

In some early subject reports it was noted that, because of the buoyant demand from well-qualified GCE A-Level applicants, few pre-1992 institutions were committed to widening access, but that departments were becoming aware of the need to develop such policies. Since 1995, the reviewers saw some evidence of these institutions developing policies to widen access into HE for under-represented groups. For some of these institutions this involved the use of access, foundation courses and franchising arrangements. Others broadened access either by targeting schools that did not traditionally send students to such institutions, providing summer schools for prospective applicants or by relaxing the GCE A-Level points required for certain groups of applicants.

The reviewers, in most subjects, saw wide variations in the extent to which students with non-traditional qualifications were admitted to HE. In Social Policy it was noted that across institutions, students with non-traditional qualifications ranged from 23 to 100 per cent of those admitted to the course. In other subjects, predominately in the post-1992 institutions, it was not unusual to find such students constituting a majority of the student population. In contrast, the reviewers also saw evidence in some institutions where only students with traditional qualifications were admitted.

Over the review period, the recruitment of students from a wider range of academic backgrounds has provided experience of HE to a far wider section of the population. This was one of the most significant developments identified by the reviewers. It also explained changes in the age distribution of the student population, with a significant increase in the number of mature students in the majority of subjects. The main exception to this development was in subjects and institutions that continued to emphasise the recruitment of highly qualified 18-year olds.

In a number of subjects, the reviewers identified a balance in the number of female and male students. However, in other subjects, the reviewers saw evidence of significant variations in the ratio of female and male students. In some subjects there was a preponderance of female students. In other subjects, the reverse was the case with a preponderance of male students. Although these gender variations were fairly constant over the review period, in some of these latter subjects, the reviewers were encouraged by the fact that a number of institutions were taking positive steps to promote the recruitment of female students. In some branches of engineering this was successful, with females constituting over 30 per cent of the student population on some programmes.

The statistical data provided by institutions on the recruitment of students from ethnic minority backgrounds were very patchy. In some subjects the reviewers pointed to the success of access policies in targeting ethnic minority groups at the local level. Sometimes this led to a significant increase in the recruitment of students from these groups, to higher than 60 per cent of the students on a programme. This demonstrated a measure of success for some institutions in meeting their aims and objectives of enabling traditionally under-represented groups access to HE.

Retention and completion rates

In almost every subject overview report, including a small number of recent reports, there was evidence of reviewers experiencing difficulty in using the quantitative information provided by institutions to calculate reliable and accurate statistics on student progression and completion.

All reports provided evidence of wide variations in the rates of progression from one level to the next and in final completion; these ranged from below 40 to almost 100 per cent. For the most part, however, the reviewers identified low academic failure rates and, in some subjects, expressed concern over the number of opportunities students had to retake failed assessments. It was rare to find failure in assessed work to be the main reason for students' non-progression. A notable exception was in Dentistry, where the reviewers identified that the main reason why between 13 and 18 per cent of students did not progress to the next level was because they couldn't cope with the amount of assessed work in the first two years of the programme.

In the majority of reports, the reviewers identified other factors that influenced the rate of students' progression and completion of their studies. In some examples they identified weaknesses in the recruitment process. In some subjects, they found that the heavy demands of the course, particularly in the first year, had not been fully explained to students, leading some to withdraw when they were unable to cope with the workload. Related to this issue, the reviewers found evidence that the extent of students' prior learning and experience had not been fully explored by admissions tutors, leading students to make the wrong choice of programme. These weaknesses often led students to transfer to other programmes within the institution.

The reviewers also noted a few examples where non-progression was associated with poor levels of academic and pastoral support, or where students were not making full use of the support networks available to them. Such problems were referred to frequently in the early subject overview reports, but in recent reports, with a few exceptions, the reviewers indicated that very few students experienced these problems. This was due in the main to improvements in admissions procedures and the support and guidance available to students.

In a number of subjects the reviewers identified higher than average non-completion rates for students admitted to HE with non-traditional entry qualifications. This pointed to a possible tension between the desire to broaden access and the consequent failure of some of these students to complete their studies. However, the reports offer conflicting interpretations on this matter, with no clear pattern or trend. In some individual subject and overview reports the reviewers noted that admitting students with modest and non-traditional entry qualifications and involving them in intellectually challenging programmes, was likely to lead to higher than normal non-completion rates.

In other subjects, the reviewers indicated that low completion rates were not necessarily associated with low entry qualifications, pointing out that for some institutions with high entry requirements, there were similar concerns over low completion rates. The reviewers also identified institutions that had traditionally admitted only highly qualified GCE A-Level entrants, but recently widened access to include those with alternative qualification, and were still successful in promoting high levels of attainment.

Most reports identified a variety of personal difficulties forcing students to prematurely terminate their studies. These involved financial, domestic and employment pressures that impacted disproportionately on mature and part-time students. With the increased diversity of the student population, these reasons for withdrawing became more prevalent towards the end of the review cycle. In many subject overview reports, the reviewers saw this as a compelling explanation for the higher than average rate of non-completion by mature and part-time students.

In some subjects, the reviewers indicated that high completion rates for students with non-traditional entry qualifications were more likely where special support was made available to these students. This enhanced the quality of their learning experience and benefited students who would otherwise be denied access to HE. What was clear from the evidence presented in the most recent subject overview reports was the success, in most subjects, of policies designed to broaden access for under-represented groups in HE. It was also clear to the reviewers, that the diversity of the student population was linked directly to the success of these policies.

Student achievements

Between institutions offering the same subject, the reviewers identified very wide variations in the distribution of classes of degree awarded to students. For example, in Chemistry, the proportion of students who achieved an Upper Second class degree or better ranged from 25 per cent in some institutions to over 70 per cent in others. Such wide variations were to be found in most subjects, with the reviewers noting that institutions at the lower end of the range were more likely to recruit more students with non-traditional entry qualifications. It was also clear, that the proportion of students graduating with an Upper Second class degree or better was higher in 2001 than in 1993.

However, as with progression rates, for some subjects the reviewers offered alternative interpretations. In Social Policy and Administration, and Psychology, the reviewers found that students had achieved levels of performance, including results that would not have been predicted, given their previous academic attainment. Reviews often concluded that this reflected enormous credit on the students and their teachers. From the evidence seen by the reviewers, it was clear that the overall achievements of students entering with modest or non-traditional qualifications represented significant added-value.

In some subjects, the reviewers expressed concerns about the small number of First class degrees awarded. This was of particular concern in those institutions that continued to recruit almost exclusively from highly qualified GCE A-Level entrants. The reviewers for Politics noted examples of institutions where no First class degrees were awarded, with the suggestion that this was due to inappropriate regulations for the classification of degrees. In contrast, in one subject, the reviewers expressed concern over the larger than average proportion of Third class and Pass degrees awarded than might be expected from the high entry qualifications of students. However, there was no noticeable variation in the number of First and Third class degrees awarded over the review period.

From their scrutiny of students' work, the reviewers saw evidence in all subjects, and for the vast majority of institutions, that students were attaining high levels of subject knowledge and skills. These included the skills of analysis, synthesis, critical reflection, evaluation, originality and the capacity for independent work. However, in the earlier review period, the reviewers also saw examples of poor quality work, leading them to the conclusion that some students were not fully attaining the stated learning outcomes. The main features of poor student performance involved low levels of analytical and critical skills, together with poor presentation and referencing of their work. In the subject overview reports published since 1998, the reviewers made far fewer criticisms, pointing to higher levels of attainment reflecting developments in the design of the curriculum, innovation in teaching and the level of support provided to students.

In reviewing the achievements of students, the reviewers also explored the extent to which they acquired personal and transferable skills. In many of the early review visits, the reviewers found many instances where institutions that claimed to be developing students' transferable skills, were failing to meet their aims and objectives. There were frequent references to poor communication skills, both in written and oral presentations. Other deficiencies included the low level of student involvement in teamwork and students failing to achieve competence in the use of ICT. In the reports published since 1998, although there remained some evidence of those deficiencies, the reviewers were impressed by the success of most subjects in ensuring that students acquired a full range of transferable skills. This improvement was often linked to changes in the content of the curriculum, and in the teaching and learning methods employed.

Progression to employment and further study

Another feature of the poor management information available to the reviewers was the lack of reliable data on students' progression to employment or further study. Despite this reservation, the reviewers pointed to the success of the large majority of students in securing employment. This was seen as a most positive feature of this aspect. In subjects with strong links to the professions, such

as Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Medicine, Nursing, Applied Social Work and Education, virtually 100 per cent of graduates found immediate employment. In other professional fields, such as Law, Town and Country Planning and Pharmacy, the reviewers found that graduates were equipped not only for careers in these professions, but also for a range of other occupations.

Students taking subjects that had little immediate vocational relevance also enjoyed high levels of success in securing employment. The reviewers pointed to the success of many subjects, including modern languages, English, Psychology, Philosophy, Politics and Mathematics in equipping students for employment or further study. A feature of many of the latest reports was the finding of the reviewers that students had attained a range of transferable skills that were valued by employers. In some subjects, including Sociology, and Communications and Media Studies, the reviewers found that although students enjoyed success in progression to further study, they had less success in securing employment compared with students studying other subjects.

In all visits, the reviewers discussed with former students their experience of HE and, where appropriate, also sought the views of employers and representatives of PSBs. The overall impression gained by the reviewers was that former students believed that they had acquired the subject-specific knowledge and skills relevant to their chosen career. In a number of earlier reports, the reviewers expressed some concerns that employers were insufficiently consulted about the qualities they expected of students. In more recent overview reports, there was considerably more evidence of discussion with employers. These discussions generally revealed to the reviewers the success of institutions in developing student work-related skills and professional knowledge that contributed to their career enhancement.

Conclusions

In review visits up to 1998, there were concerns about the reliability of management information systems. Since then, the reviewers have seen improvements in these systems, so that the progression, performance and achievements of students were more accurately recorded.

Throughout the review process, with a few exceptions, demand for places has increased. In part, this reflected developments in recruitment strategies, particularly those designed to broaden access to HE. This led to the emergence of a far more diverse student population.

The withdrawal rate of students has been variable between institutions and subjects, but had more to do with the changed personal circumstances of students than to academic failure in the subject studied. For students from non-traditional backgrounds, who completed their programmes, the evidence indicated that they achieved good classes of degrees, demonstrating excellent added-value.

For all students in all subjects there was evidence of higher levels of attainment overall, reflected in an increasing number of Upper Second class honours degrees or better being awarded. The reviewers also saw an increasing body of evidence, demonstrating that students were acquiring a broader range of transferable skills. This was related to the findings in most subjects, that students were successful in gaining employment or in proceeding to further study. However, even in recent reports, the reviewers had some continuing concerns about the reliability of statistical data, particularly in relation to first career destination statistics.

Student support and guidance

Introduction

Throughout the review period, the support and guidance received by students was a key feature of their experience of HE. All institutions aimed to provide a caring and supportive environment at both subject and institutional levels. This involved a mix of formal systems, informal contact and

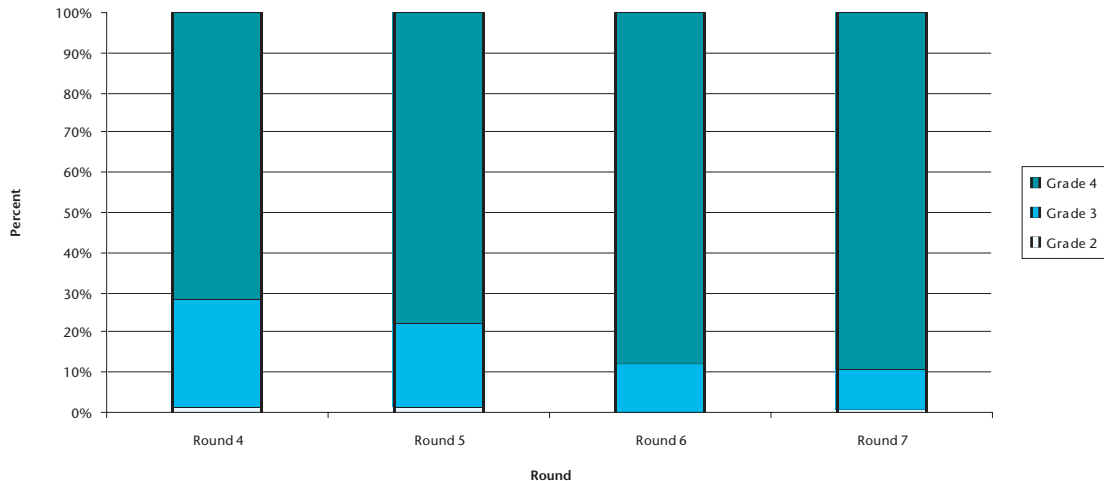
written guidance in both printed and increasingly electronic forms. The support systems typically encompassed the admission and induction of students to the institution. On entry, students expected academic and pastoral support to ease their transition to HE. This required the provision of particular support to students with individual needs. As they progressed through their programme of studies, students also required sound and informed advice on career opportunities. The reviewers scrutinised these arrangements to assure themselves that the support and guidance systems met the academic and pastoral needs of students at all levels and on all programmes.

Graded profile for student support and guidance by round

Almost all of the subject review reports and the subject overview reports revealed that excellent student support and guidance systems were in place in the majority of institutions. They also demonstrated the very high level of student satisfaction with the quality of support they received. Since 1995, when grades were awarded for each aspect of provision, student support and guidance has been the highest rated aspect of provision in all subject overview reports. Of the reviews conducted between 1995-2001, approximately 84 per cent were awarded grade 4 and almost 16 per cent grade 3.

The average grade for this aspect was 3.7 in 1995-96, rising to 3.9 during the period 1998-2001. A distinctive feature of this aspect is that the FECs were performing as well as HEIs, with the reviewers commenting frequently on the development in FECs of staff and students creating close and caring HE communities.

Graded profile for student support and guidance by round



Admissions and induction

With the rapid increase in student numbers on both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, a clear strategy for their support and guidance was essential. A distinctive feature of the increased numbers of student was that institutions were required to support more mature students and those not possessing traditional entry qualifications. In a number of reports, the reviewers observed that for these students to succeed, institutions must have high-quality support systems in place. Most reports confirmed that high-quality support was available, and this contributed greatly to the quality of student learning. It was rare for the reviewers to criticise providers for not recognising the special needs of mature and non-traditional entry students

In seeking admission, students normally initiated contact with the institution when making a formal application for entry to a programme of study. At this point, the admissions procedures of the institution came into operation. The reviewers found that practice varied throughout the sector, but

there was always a screening process of all applications. In most reports, the reviewers pointed to the extensive use of open days, designed to acquaint students with the range of facilities available, not only within the institution but also in the locality and region. An example of good practice seen by the reviewers was the use of current students acting as guides to groups of applicants. There was some evidence of this practice in early visits, but in the most recent reports, the reviewers saw this as a fairly routine practice. Students reported to the reviewers that they valued greatly the opportunity of meeting with current students and saw this development as a means of providing them with detailed information about the institution.

In some instances, the reviewers found that all candidates were interviewed; in others, interviews were confined to particular groups of students, for example, mature applicants and those with non-traditional entry qualifications. From the beginning of the review process, in the vast majority of instances, these procedures were well organised and comprehensive. In one of the earlier subject overview reports, the reviewers concluded that the admissions processes appeared to be much more sophisticated than in the past.

The quality of information they received, and the arrangements for open days, were important features in assisting students to make a choice of institution. Most reports demonstrated students' satisfaction with the admissions process, with students frequently suggesting that their initial favourable impression of the institution confirmed their eventual decision to accept an offer of a place. Typically, students commented on the high quality of documentation and comprehensive information made available to them. They also valued the friendly and helpful support they received from the staff and current students. The favourable impression students' gained from the admissions process was sustained by the induction they received on entry to the institution. In almost all institutions there were formal induction sessions, usually lasting from three days to one week. These involved new students meeting subject staff, their personal tutor and current students. The induction sessions often included tours of the library, IT facilities, the Students' Union and central welfare facilities.

In a number of later visits, the reviewers saw evidence of separate induction arrangements tailored to meet the needs of particular groups of students, including overseas, part-time and mature students. In some institutions there were separate induction arrangements for second-year students and for students who were direct entrants to the second year of programmes. Separate induction arrangements were also generally available for postgraduate students. These were usually of high quality, but in a small number of programmes the reviewers noted that they were not as well considered as those available to undergraduates.

In an increasing number of examples, staff used the induction period to check on the prior learning and experience of students. Particular attention was paid to identifying those students who lacked some of the required skills. In a number of instances the reviewers found that this was a necessary development because of the wide range of educational backgrounds of students recruited to programmes. Also, sometimes, because of changes to the science curricula in schools, institutions found it desirable to administer Prior Knowledge Tests to students during induction in order to optimise academic support for them at an early stage of the programme. The use of such diagnostic testing during the induction period had been developed in many subjects and institutions. The reviewers saw this as an important means of retaining students on their programme of study. One development seen by the reviewers in an increasing number of institutions was the use of second and third-year students acting as mentors to new students. Known variously as 'proctors', 'parents' or 'uncles' and 'aunties', they fulfilled an important role in socialising new students, not only during the induction period, but also throughout the first year. Such schemes were highly regarded by new students, who saw this development as assisting them in making the transition to HE.

In all subjects, the reviewers found that a most important aspect of the students' initial learning experience was the quality of written guidance they received about their programmes. During the

induction period they were given handbooks informing them about course structure, curriculum content, assessment procedures, the personal tutor system and welfare support. These handbooks were frequently supplemented with additional information on teaching methods and study skills. The reviewers also found that an increasing number of institutions were making all of this material available in electronic form. With very rare exceptions, the evidence seen by the reviewers throughout the cycle of review, and particularly in recent visits, demonstrated a high level of student satisfaction with the quality of the literature they received. From a sound base at the beginning of the review period, the reviewers saw these developments as strengthening the admission and induction systems available to students.

Tutorial systems and informal support

The most commonly adopted strategy for providing students with both academic and pastoral guidance at the subject level was the provision of tutorial support for all students. Reviewers found a variety of tutorial systems. In the majority they found that students were allocated a personal tutor who would act as their adviser during their first year, and possibly into their second year. In the final year, for students doing a project/dissertation, it was often the case for their project supervisor to act as their personal tutor. In other systems, often designed to cope with an increase in student numbers, tutorial support was undertaken by module leaders, level tutors or year tutors. In the best systems, there were frequent timetabled meetings between the tutor and student, with records kept of the meeting. Typically, the tutor would have details of the students' progress in each module, and so was in a position to identify and deal with underachieving students. The overall impression, whichever system was employed, was that the academic and pastoral needs of students were met to a very high standard and contributed greatly to the quality of the learning experience.

In recognising the importance of tutorial provision, an increasing number of institutions provided training to tutors so that they could become more effective in fulfilling this role. In later overview reports, there was evidence of considerable progress in offering tutors training in counselling skills and more general training in the duties and responsibilities involved in tutoring. The reviewers also frequently saw evidence that secretarial and administrative staff, often the first point of contact for students, received training in counselling skills. The reviewers saw ample evidence that training was supported by high-quality handbooks explaining the tutorial system, and made available to staff and students.

Despite widespread recognition of the positive features of the tutor systems, a small number of reviewers had some concerns about particular features of student support and guidance. Negative comments made by the reviewers concerned the reactive nature of some tutorial systems, where contact with the tutor depended on the student taking the initiative. This was in contrast to the vast majority of systems where tutors were proactive in initiating contact with their students. The reviewers were of the opinion that in reactive systems, less confident students, and possibly those most in need of support, would be reluctant to initiate contact with their tutor, and their needs could go unnoticed. In visits where the reviewers judged that the providers were not making a full contribution, the reactive nature of the personal tutor system was one reason for awarding a grade 3. However, in the most recent round of visits this was a rare occurrence, demonstrating that institutions, faced with increased student numbers, had introduced changes to secure the effectiveness of tutorial support for their students.

In a small number of reports the reviewers commented on evidence concerning the large number of students tutored by each tutor, with implications for the effectiveness of the tutoring service. A related concern was that in departments employing few female staff, the gender distribution of tutors did not match the gender profile of students. The reviewers also saw some evidence that students taking combined or joint degrees on modular programmes might receive less effective support from academic staff. Occasionally, students were assigned tutors from inappropriate subjects, resulting in inadequate guidance on their choice of modules. Similarly, the reviewers found

inadequate liaison between departments, leading some joint honours students to the view that, compared to students on single subject programmes, staff were less involved with their welfare.

At postgraduate level there was considerable variation in the provision of academic guidance and pastoral support. The impression given in some reports was of institutions taking the view that postgraduate students were sufficiently experienced to deal with problems as they arose. The reviewers found in some subjects that there was no personal tutor system at postgraduate level, and programmes where personal tutors were allocated to students but were inaccessible to their tutees.

These few weaknesses, which were identified by the reviewers mainly in the early rounds of visits, need to be set in the context of the almost universal reference to the excellent quality of tutorial support and guidance received by students. This support was a strong feature of provision at the start of the review period, and there was abundant evidence of enhancement during this period. In virtually every report, reference was made to the excellent relations existing between staff, including support staff, and students. In many reports, the reviewers pointed to the strength of informal arrangements for supporting students. There was frequent reference to staff adopting an open-door policy, ensuring that students had access to tutors when they required urgent guidance. The dominant impression, gained by the reviewers in all subjects, was of a caring learning culture based on confidence and mutual trust.

Student placements

On many courses students either opted, or were required, to undertake activities away from their institution. In addition to placement periods overseas for language students, there was a wide variety of professional or industrial placements for students on vocational courses leading to experience of the world of work. These placements were predominately associated with vocational programmes but in recent visits the reviewers saw evidence of this opportunity extended to students on non-vocational programmes, with clear enhancement to the quality of their learning

For all students undertaking such activities, this was a significant aspect of their learning experience. If the placement experience was poorly organised, the difficulties experienced by students could be acute. The evidence provided in many reports revealed a wide variety of different methods of support and guidance for these students. The reviewers found that the majority of placements abroad were carefully organised and supported. Students were well prepared prior to leaving their institution, appropriate placements found and students supported by visits and contact during the placement abroad. However, some of the reviewers saw examples of a lack of systematic planning and support for students on an overseas placement.

In subjects where students had the opportunity to experience professional or industrial work placements, the reviewers were generally positive in their comments on the value of this for students. They often commented on the excellent preparation and close monitoring of placement activities, ensuring the best possible experience for students. This enhanced their professional knowledge and skills, and frequently improved their employment prospects. However, the reviewers also saw examples of less carefully arranged placements. Occasionally, they saw evidence of students not always being effectively supported during the placement and of inadequate liaison between academic tutors and tutors at the placement site. These criticisms were found mainly in the early review visits and it was clear from more recent reports, with one or two exceptions, that the reviewers found that placement activities, increasingly, were clearly enhancing the quality of the students' learning experience.

Study skills

In early reports, subject teams made very few references to the need to develop students' study skills or provide remedial support for students experiencing learning difficulties. However, in a few early reports, the reviewers recommended that more systematic training in study skills should be

made available to first-year students. Since 1996, the reviewers saw far more evidence of subject teams developing systems to identify students experiencing learning difficulties and in providing study skills programmes to overcome these difficulties. In many subjects, the reviewers found guidance on study skills to be well developed and matched to the backgrounds of students, particularly those with special needs.

In some subjects, the reviewers commended peer-assisted learning schemes, in which senior students ran small-group sessions for new students. Other forms of assistance included comprehensive study skills packs and students keeping personal development portfolios of the study skills they had acquired. The reviewers also saw improvements in the way institutions deal with conditions such as dyslexia; starting with early diagnosis, leading to the provision of extensive support. Supporting students in the acquisition of study skills occurred in a number of ways. Many subject teams built guidance on study skills into individual core modules. Sometimes, students had the opportunity to attend special study skills tutorials, arranged either by the subject team or by central support services. The reviewers found that whatever method was employed, the provision of study skills support contributed significantly to the learning experience of many students.

Central services

The student support services, provided centrally by institutions, typically included advice on accommodation, careers, finance, health, student counselling and learning support. The overall aim of these services was to ensure that all students, whatever their circumstances, were able to participate fully in their programme of study. The achievement of this depended very much on close liaison between the staff in central services and the subject teams. In the vast majority of reports, the reviewers were very complimentary about the high quality of these centrally-provided services.

Particular features highlighted by the reviewers included the effectiveness of counselling for students experiencing psychological problems and the care shown by academic staff in dealing with these students. In many reports, the reviewers pointed to the assistance available to students with disabilities, including the provision of wheelchair access and support for those with hearing and sight problems. In virtually all subject reports, the reviewers saw extensive evidence of the high value that students placed on this level of provision.

The careers services of institutions played a vital role in preparing students for the transition from academic study to the world of paid employment or further study. As with other central services, their success depended, in part, on the level of cooperation with staff in the academic departments. In the majority of reports, students praised the high quality of advice and guidance they received from the career services.

They referred frequently to the comprehensive guidance they received from career services in preparing their curricula vitae, and of advice on interview techniques. The reviewers saw examples of Career Planning modules built into the curriculum and the provision of seminars on career planning. The reviewers also saw evidence, in some subjects, of institutions profiling students' attainment of key skills for submission to potential employers.

Only rarely, and then usually associated with specialist provision, was there criticism of career services. In the Music overview report, the reviewers noted that careers such as teaching, research, music management and publishing were not sufficiently covered. The reviewers also noted in a number of FECs, that career advice did not fully serve the needs of HE students.

Conclusions

The excellent quality of support and guidance offered to students has been a major strength in the vast majority of institutions. This high quality was evident at the beginning of subject review and continued throughout the review period. It was also true in FECs, where the often small numbers of students and staff permitted a particularly caring relationship to develop.

In recent years there has been clear evidence of innovation and enhancement in the support and guidance offered to students. The reviewers, in virtually all the recent reports, identified improvement in the admission and induction arrangements, particularly for mature students and those with non-traditional entry qualifications. A further development was in the extensive use made of senior students to mentor new students.

There was some criticism of personal tutoring systems, but the majority of these systems were regarded as highly effective and worked well. There was also evidence of development here, with many more institutions providing training for staff engaged in personal tutoring. It was also notable that, in recent reports, the reviewers identified sound systems in place to support students on placement visits.

The reviewers noted a significant extension of study skills programmes, and support for students in need of remedial assistance. An interesting and helpful innovation was in the use of senior students providing learning sessions for new students.

During the cycle of subject review, reviewers noted a number of concerns. Arrangements for, and the frequency of, contact between personal tutors and their tutees, and that part-time students and students on joint programmes did not always receive the best advice on their choice of options. There was generally a less structured personal tutor support for postgraduate students. Support for students on industrial placement or study abroad was often reported as in some way deficient. The careers service has offered only limited advice to students on specialist programmes.

The reviewers identified these concerns only rarely and mainly in the early review cycle. They should not cloud or diminish the overall picture of student support and guidance, which was generally one of excellent care for students delivered through effective systems, and served by dedicated and caring staff.

Learning resources

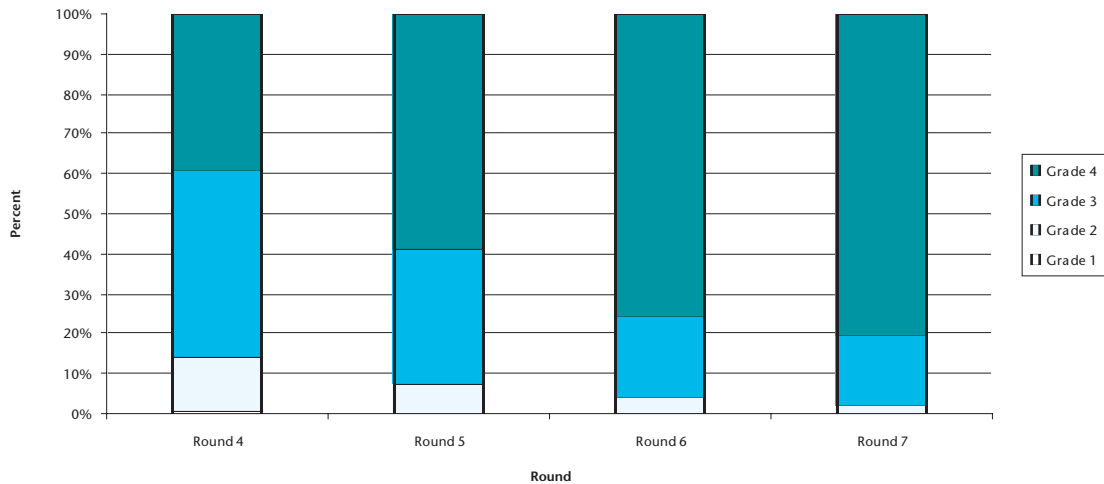
Introduction

Reviewers examined the extent to which library services, equipment and IT facilities were appropriate and accessible in terms of supporting students in their learning. In their observation of teaching, the reviewers paid attention to the quality of teaching accommodation and, in particular, whether the rooms were suitable for the teaching and learning methods employed. They also wished to be assured that resources were deployed effectively and supported by technical and administrative staff.

Graded profile for learning resources by round

Over the review period, it was quite clear that significant improvements had been made in the provision of learning resources in the majority of institutions. Of the 1,914 reviews conducted since 1995, about 67 per cent of providers were awarded a grade 4, about 27 per cent were awarded a grade 3, and about 5 per cent received a grade 2. Only three providers were awarded a grade 1 (0.2 per cent). The average grade for this aspect has increased from 3.2 in 1995 to 3.8 in 2000-01; by some margin the largest increase for any aspect of provision. Over this period, the reviewers saw considerable new investment in resources to support teaching and learning. A particularly important development was the application of ICT in curricula design and in teaching and learning practices. This led the reviewers to the conclusion that this was one of the most significant developments in HE during the review period.

Graded profile for learning resources by round



Learning resource strategies

New investment in learning resources required careful planning and management. For this reason the reviewers explored with subject teams whether institutions had developed effective strategies for the deployment of learning resources. In most reports published since 1996, there was usually some reference to learning resource strategies.

The reviewers saw examples of good practice in the form of well-articulated and comprehensive strategies for ensuring that students had access to, and experience in, the use of specialist and more generally available resources. Such strategies were linked directly to aims and objectives, to curricula planning and to the teaching, learning and assessment methods employed. The reviewers looked for learning resource strategies that dealt with the ways in which institutions addressed the problem of increased student numbers and with developments in teaching and learning methods, particularly the emphasis given to students' independent learning. The reviewers also saw evidence in a number of institutions of closely related subject groups combining their resource strategies, thus providing their students access to a wider range of specialist facilities. In well-articulated resource strategies, the reviewers saw explicit policies in place for the updating, replacement and maintenance of equipment, IT and teaching accommodation. In the best examples this involved a rolling programme for the enhancement of learning resources.

In a number of institutions, the reviewers noted that strategic planning involved consultation between senior managers, staff and students at the subject level. Often, there were clear mechanisms for monitoring the effectiveness of the strategy. In some institutions, service-level target agreements for the providers of library and ICT services had been introduced. This development played an important role in improving the quality of learning resources available to students.

The reviewers also saw an increasing number of instances where strategic planning had led to the combining of library and ICT services into learning resource centres (LRCs). In some subjects this was a widespread development involving the integration of paper-based and electronic information sources. The reviewers commended such initiatives for making available to students comprehensive and accessible learning resources.

In most reports, there was clear evidence that the provision of high-quality learning resources was linked to the clarity of institutional learning resource strategies. There was evidence for this in most of the subject overview reports. Since 1998, the reviewers made many more positive comments about the clarity of resource strategies, indicating that these had contributed substantially to improving the quality of teaching and learning. However, such positive comments were not

universal and throughout the review period, including the most recent reports and particularly in FECs, the reviewers identified poorly articulated or non-existent learning resource strategies adversely affecting the quality of provision. In particular, the failure to identify priorities had sometimes led to some students experiencing problems in accessing necessary learning resources.

Library services

Although there had been developments in the articulation of resource strategies and in the availability of resources, the reviewers, in all subjects, found significant differences between institutions in the provision of library services. One difference, evident early in the review process, was that the pre-1992 universities had significantly better library resources than the post-1992 universities. As with overall learning resources, the best practice in library provision seen by the reviewers was in institutions where consultation between librarians and subject staff had led to clear strategies for the deployment of library services. The reviewers saw this as very important if the provision of library resources was to keep pace with curricular developments and changing student needs. This was particularly true for those libraries with modest resources, where careful planning was necessary in order to maximise support for their students.

A key feature of excellent provision, commented on by the reviewers in many reports, was that library services were readily accessible to all students. An important consideration was the proximity of the library to teaching rooms and other facilities used frequently by students. A related consideration that figured prominently in the minds of students was the length of time that the library remained open. In some instances, the reviewers noted that the library was open seven days a week and increasingly for 24 hours a day, thus facilitating the collection and return of books within prescribed time limits. Accessibility to the library also required that there were adequate study spaces available at all times.

Reviewers saw evidence of more restricted access to library services. Sometimes, because teaching occurred across a number of sites, students found access difficult. In a number of reports, the reviewers expressed concern about the opening hours of the library. Related to this was the evidence, in some institutions, that libraries did not open at weekends. This limited access posed problems for part-time and distance-learning students, with the suggestion, in some overview reports, that this led to students' over-reliance on set books and constrained their wider reading.

There was far less evidence of such difficulties in later reports, indicating improvement in students' access to library facilities. The reviewers found clear evidence of libraries developing policies for improving access, including the use of telephone reservation of books, secure arrangements for the return of books when the library was closed, and to assist distance-learning students by posting books to their homes.

Most subject overview reports provided evidence of some inadequacies in the book and journal stocks held by libraries. The reviewers noted that, even in the best provided libraries, there was pressure on the book stock at peak times. Much of the pressure experienced by libraries resulted from increased student numbers and of budgets failing to keep pace with the increase in the number of users. Also, a related problem, identified by the reviewers in some subjects, was the rapid increase in the cost of materials, particularly specialist books and periodicals. A frequently mentioned problem, identified by students in most subjects, was the lack of multiple copies of core texts, or that the specialist books they required were already on loan to other students. A particular problem experienced by some students was in gaining access to specialist books or journals for work on their final-year project or dissertation.

Despite these frequently mentioned observations, the reviewers saw extensive evidence of librarians and academic staff developing strategies to cope with the difficulties experienced by their students. One approach was the introduction of a variety of short-loan periods, including a few hours during the day or overnight loans. This approach was facilitated by the development, in most institutions, of

computerised catalogues, enabling librarians to monitor closely the use of the book stock. A related solution, seen by many review teams, was the extensive use of the interlibrary loan system, particularly by final-year and postgraduate students. The reviewers also saw that many libraries were making substantial investment in the provision of electronic journals. Also, there was increasing evidence of local universities entering into consortium arrangements, or making arrangements with nearby public libraries, thus broadening the range of material available to students.

Other solutions to cope with student needs included the purchase of multiple copies of key texts and more extensive provision of photocopying facilities. The reviewers saw many instances where the academic staff produced study packs of articles for distribution to their students. In some institutions, the reviewers saw evidence of the subject department or school establishing a small department/school library, or supplementing the main library budget from their own funds.

In the majority of reports, reference was made to the excellent support provided by librarians. Libraries mostly organised their staff into teams of subject specialists who liaised closely with subject teams. This close liaison ensured that the library received reading lists and requests for new books and journals in time for the start of the academic year. Librarians were also closely involved in the induction of new students, providing them with training in accessing and using library facilities. An important aspect of this activity was that when students found the materials they required were unavailable, the training they had received enabled them to explore alternative sources.

In the majority of reports published since 1998, the reviewers pointed to the success of the above strategies in solving problems that were endemic at the start of the review process. In many reports, the reviewers identified this as one of the main reasons why an increasing number of institutions fully achieved their stated aims and objectives. In all subjects, the reviewers noted that increased investment and the imaginative use of resources had clearly enhanced the quality of the students' learning experience.

Information and communication technology

At the start of the review cycle, the reviewers identified wide variations between institutions and subjects in the use of ICT. In the early overview reports, there were many references to staff paying insufficient attention to the potential benefits of IT in teaching, and to the use of computer-aided learning (CAL) in encouraging independent learning. There was also a low expectation that all staff and students should become computer literate, with the suggestion that IT was not yet part of the education culture. However, even in this early period of review, the reviewers saw examples of good use of IT, including 24-hour access for students and the use of dedicated software packages and CAL. It was clear to the reviewers that even in institutions where IT had a limited impact on the curriculum, many of them were embarking on substantial investment programmes in order to improve the quality of the learning experience for future generations of students.

In this early period, the main deficiency identified by the reviewers was the lack of workstations available for both staff and students to access relevant software packages. That courses in computer science should be included in this criticism was surprising to the reviewers, given that students required ready access to workstations in order to develop the practical skills associated with computer programming. Other deficiencies identified by the reviewers included the continued use of out-of-date equipment and the limited availability of specialist software. Also of concern was the clear evidence, in some institutions, that staff and students received either no, or only rudimentary induction and training in the use of IT.

In the period between 1995 and 1998, the reviewers, in all subjects, identified significant developments in the application and use of IT in many teaching and learning programmes. While all of the above weaknesses were still seen in a few institutions, they were commented on less frequently and the reviewers were far more positive about the extensive deployment of IT facilities. They found much evidence of strategic planning for IT, often associated with the development of

LRCs. There was also clear evidence of the benefits of earlier investment, including a significant increase in the availability of workstations in most institutions, with 24-hour access to IT facilities becoming a more common feature of provision.

Other developments during this period included more extensive use of CAL and clear evidence of more sophisticated training for staff and students. Developments in email communication, often networked to halls of residence, easier access to the internet, the use of specialist software and the first signs of in-house intranet web pages, significantly enhanced the overall quality of the students' learning experience. This was a particularly important development for students on distance-learning programmes. These developments were sustained and further developed in the post-1998 period. On some visits, the reviewers still saw evidence of poor provision, with urgent attempts by institutions to update computer hardware and software. However, the dominant impression was one of considerable progress, with the reviewers concluding that in some subjects the provision of IT services was excellent in a majority of institutions. In this period students enjoyed almost universal access to email communication and to the internet.

In most of the recent reports, the reviewers identified significant developments in the production of in-house web sites. These made available to students a range of learning materials, including hand outs, lecture notes, descriptions of modules, previous examination papers and daily administrative guidance to staff and students. In a few subjects and institutions, there was evidence of the network being used to construct virtual-learning environments, which were particularly useful for part-time and distance-learning students.

There were still criticisms of IT facilities at the end of the review period. However, the dominant picture that emerged from all the overview reports was that the reviewers had identified significant developments in each cycle of review. These developments, often running in tandem with enhancements in library resources, had improved greatly the quality of student learning.

Specialist equipment and collections

In a number of subjects, the quality of teaching and learning was linked directly to the availability of specialist equipment, and collections and museums. In engineering subjects, equipment, in the form of heavy plant, required considerable space. In life science subjects, it was more usual to find laboratories equipped with facilities used by students to acquire theoretical knowledge and to develop their practical skills. The need for specialist equipment was not confined to these areas and the reviewers saw extensive use of equipment in Geology, Archaeology, History of Art, Architecture and Design, Communication and Media Studies and in language teaching. In some subjects, the use of specialist facilities made very heavy demands on resources, with the requirement in Agriculture, Forestry and Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, for example, that students had access to farms. In the final review cycle, only two of the 11 subjects reviewed made use of specialist equipment and, in both subjects, the reviewers commended the quality of provision.

Throughout the review process, the reviewers generally found that the equipment used was fit for purpose and, in a number of cases, was excellent. In one of the early reports, the reviewers pointed to pressures on the use of equipment and the conflict faced by institutions in deciding whether funds should be spent on improving accommodation or ensuring that specialist equipment was up-to-date. In other early reports, the reviewers identified instances where equipment was dated and in need of upgrading and, in one subject, this was true for 50 per cent of providers. However, it was in this subject that the reviewers saw evidence of industrial sponsors providing institutions with high-quality equipment.

Between 1995 and 1998, the reviewers found an increasing number of examples where closely-related subjects combined their resources in order to purchase or maintain high-quality specialist equipment collections or museums. In other subjects, the reviewers saw evidence of research-funded laboratories and equipment being used by final-year undergraduate and

postgraduate students in their preparation for project work. During this period the reviewers saw evidence of substantial investment in language teaching, including language laboratories and audiovisual equipment making use of satellite links. Although the reviewers saw these developments as enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, they were critical of the level of provision in some institutions, and in one report described the equipment as obsolete.

Between 1998 and 2000, in every subject where specialist equipment was used, the reviewers made fewer adverse comments. They were far more positive in commending the specialist facilities available to students in these subjects. They identified the continuing practice of subject teams combining their resources, of external sponsorship and of increased research funding making new equipment available for student use. As with library provision and IT facilities, the reviewers identified considerable developments across the sector in the systematic acquisition, replacement, maintenance and upgrading of specialist equipment that had contributed to the overall quality of teaching and learning.

Teaching accommodation

Students spend a considerable part of their time in formal class sessions in large lecture theatres, rooms for small group teaching, laboratories and workshops. In the best provision seen by the reviewers, teaching rooms were well designed for the teaching methods employed, and well maintained with comfortable furniture, appropriate teaching aids. Where the accommodation was not of an appropriate standard, the reviewers noted that an unsuitable or unattractive environment significantly reduced the quality of the students' learning experience.

In some reports, the reviewers noted that students appreciated a learning environment where the academic, administrative and teaching accommodation was in close proximity, encouraging the development of a sense of community. In contrast, the reviewers noted that some teaching rooms were so poorly located that the quality of teaching and learning was compromised.

Throughout the review process, in all subjects, the reviewers saw examples of excellent teaching accommodation available to students. However, it was clear from many early reports that there were also serious deficiencies in the accommodation used for teaching.

A common theme, identified in a number of subject overview reports, was of overcrowding in lecture theatres and in rooms used for small-group teaching. Reviewers observed that the accommodation available for teaching had not kept pace with the increase in student numbers. They saw frequent examples where the number of students in a room exceeded the capacity of the room, leading to cramped conditions that diminished the quality of learning. In the report produced since 1998, there were far fewer criticisms about overcrowding, although in one subject this was the main reason for the reviewers concluding that institutions were not making a full contribution to achieving their aims and objectives (Other Subjects Allied to Medicine).

In the earlier reviews, there were frequent references to other deficiencies with teaching accommodation. Reviewers frequently pointed to extraneous noise levels interfering with teaching, or that the internal acoustic levels were poor. The reviewers also observed teaching in poorly ventilated accommodation, leading to a stuffy environment or to low ambient temperatures. There were examples of an insufficient number of rooms for small-group teaching, or where the rooms were too small for the number of students in the group. Related to this difficulty, the reviewers saw teaching occurring in rooms that were inappropriate for the methods being employed. Poor timetabling practice led to a poor match between the type of teaching and the accommodation used: for example, small-group teaching occurring in a tiered lecture theatre.

Also of concern to the reviewers was the evidence of poorly-maintained teaching accommodation, some of which required urgent refurbishment. As with other features of learning resources, these criticisms were made most frequently in the earlier review periods. In the period since 1998,

although some of the above deficiencies were still identified by the reviewers, the picture was far more positive with many references made to newly built or completely refurbished accommodation.

A notable feature of these developments was that the vast majority of institutions had taken the opportunity to improve significantly the quality of teaching and learning aids installed in teaching rooms. There was frequent reference to the use of state-of-the-art audiovisual equipment, including computer network links commonly installed in teaching rooms.

Technical and administrative support

Throughout the review process, a strong feature of the provision identified by the reviewers, in all subjects, was the high quality of support provided by technical, secretarial and administrative staff. In all of the overview reports they were described as well-qualified and committed staff who contributed greatly to the success of institutions in meeting their aims and objectives. Some criticisms of the role of support staff identified by the reviewers in early review visits, related mainly to the small number of staff in post, rather than to their undoubted qualities.

In most of the recent reports, the reviewers noted the extent to which support staff were integrated fully into the academic process, including membership of the main decision-making committees. In many overview reports, the work of secretarial and administrative staff was singled out for praise. The reviewers indicated that they are often the first point of contact for students, and are seen as an extra layer of support and guidance. In similar fashion, the reviewers identified the vital role played by technicians in supporting teaching and learning, and in ensuring compliance with health and safety regulations.

Conclusions

It is in the provision of learning resources that changes across the review period are perhaps most visible. It became increasingly evident, that in an era of generally falling funding, many more providers were adopting a much more strategic approach in making decisions on learning resource budgets, so that these were more closely integrated with programme planning.

This strategic planning involved not only senior institutional staff but also both staff and students at subject level. In many institutions, in an effort in part to overcome deficiencies in both library and IT resources, they were integrated into learning resources centres.

In turn, this development often contributed to making learning resources more readily accessible to students. This was evident in the electronic cataloguing of book and journal stocks, the availability of electronic journals and the range of specialist software packages used by students. Other approaches to improve accessibility included extending opening hours, arrangements for borrowing from nearby public libraries and developing short-term loan arrangements.

Reviewers identified the widespread use of IT as the most significant development over the review period. At the commencement of the period, reviewers frequently commented on the inadequate IT facilities available to staff and students. At the end of the period they commented on the almost universal use of IT employed in teaching and the way that sophisticated IT facilities enhanced student learning.

Similarly, there was extensive evidence of enhancement in the provision of specialist equipment collections and museums used in many subjects. An important feature of this development was the evidence of staff in cognate subjects pooling their resources to acquire state-of-the-art equipment.

Throughout the review period, the accommodation used in teaching and learning continued to concern reviewers, leading them to criticise the use of overcrowded, unsuitable and poorly-furnished teaching rooms. Although in the most recent reports they made similar criticisms, they

also referred to substantial developments, with evidence of new buildings of refurbishment to existing rooms and the widespread use of advanced teaching aids.

Finally, reviewers noted, in every subject, the important work done by support staff. The overall impression was that administrative, secretarial and technical staff, by being better integrated into the provision contributed greatly to the quality of the students' learning experience.

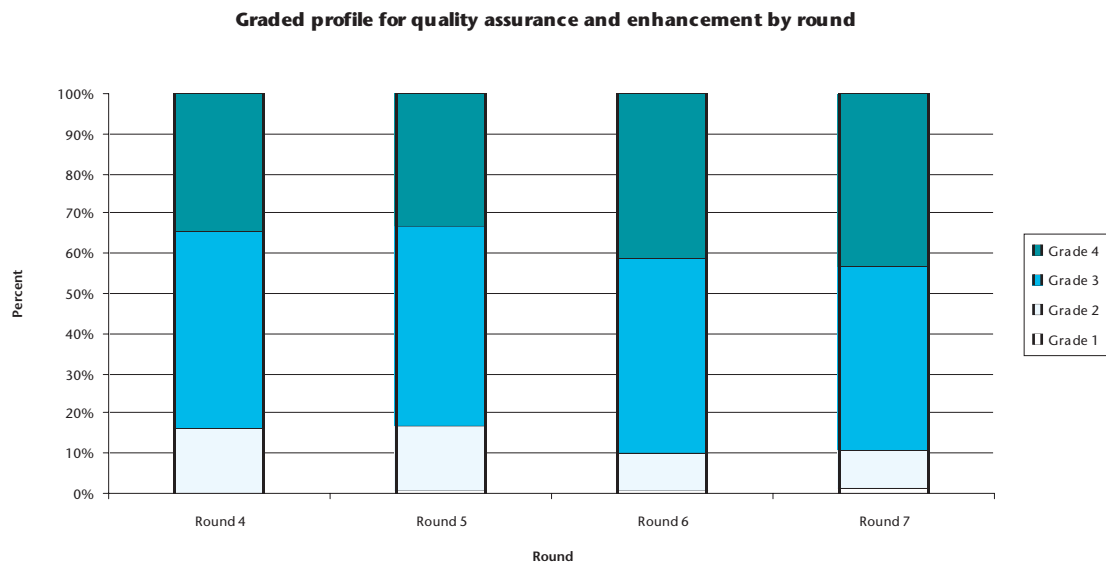
Quality assurance (management) and enhancement

Introduction

In exploring the quality management and enhancement procedures in place, the reviewers needed to be satisfied that these ensured for students a high-quality learning experience that was responsive to their needs and interests. It was particularly important that subject teams were able to demonstrate that quality management processes were efficient and effective in enabling staff to identify and speedily address any weaknesses in the provision, to ensure that problems identified had been dealt with, thus closing the quality loop and so improving the quality of the learning experience. Although the review methodology did not prescribe a set of criteria against which judgements would be made, the reviewers looked for institutional quality frameworks that prescribed internal processes for the monitoring, review and evaluation of the quality of learning experienced by students. The reviewers looked for clear lines of accountability from the subject level, through to schools and faculties and finally to institutional level. Such lines of accountability ensured that action was taken at appropriate times to sustain the quality of provision. Typically, the quality frameworks stipulated the procedures for approving new course proposals, the periodic review of existing programmes and for making changes to the overall provision. In examining the operation of the above processes, the reviewers explored with subject teams the extent to which staff, students and external examiners were involved in quality management. In some subjects, the reviewers needed to be assured of the participation by external agencies, including professional accrediting bodies and employers. In looking for evidence of enhancement, the reviewers also examined the extent and range of developmental opportunities for staff, particularly those relevant to enhancing teaching and learning skills.

Graded profile for quality management and enhancement by round

Throughout the subject review cycle, the quality management and enhancement aspect received one of the lowest average grades. The overall profile of grades provided an indicator of the extent to which quality assurance procedures were being implemented effectively at subject level in institutions. There was only marginal improvement in the average grade for this aspect, from 3.2 in 1995 to 3.3 in 2001. Although the reviewers saw excellent examples of quality management, it was clear from the evidence presented in the majority of overview reports that, in this aspect, many providers were not making a full contribution to the attainment of their aim and objectives.



Quality management and enhancement procedures

In the first round of reviews, the reviewers saw excellent examples of quality assurance/management systems in a number of institutions that secured the quality of the students' learning experience. In the examples of good practice, the reviewers noted rigorous systems for the validation and approval of new courses and modules. This was supported by regular periodic review, involving the close monitoring of programmes on an annual basis, together with more detailed scrutiny every five years, usually involving external agencies. In some institutions, the reviewers noted a strong commitment to a culture of enhancement involving a partnership between staff, students and external stakeholders. Here, there were transparent systems in place and a sense of purpose based on shared ownership of quality assurance procedures.

However, in this early period of review, the reviewers commented frequently on deficiencies in the process of quality assurance that was detrimental to the quality of learning. In particular, they expressed concern that quality assurance structures were either not yet in place, or were still in the process of development. Where quality frameworks existed, the reviewers found that they were not always fully implemented at subject level. Reviewers also pointed to low levels of staff and student involvement with the quality process, leading reviewers to a sense that staff and students lacked ownership of the process. Also, in early reports, frequent reference was made to the lack of management information available for staff to closely monitor student attainment of learning outcomes, and the overall attainment of the stated aims and objectives.

Reviewers found some deficiencies in a significant number of providers, even in the most recent cycle of visits. In early reports, the reviewers noted considerable variation in the extent to which quality assurance procedures were embedded within institutional quality frameworks. Also, the reviewers noted that procedures for quality assurance ranged from the fully developed to the rudimentary. Related to these criticisms was the judgement made by the reviewers, that quality procedures in 60 per cent of providers visited were not sufficiently robust and lacked rigour. In much later review reports, reviewers noted that some institutions had yet to develop systematic and coordinated quality management systems that were sufficiently robust to ensure that important issues were recognised, recorded and acted upon.

The reviewers noted that in alerting staff to potential and actual problems, there was an over-reliance on informal contact between staff and students. Students claimed that a consequence of this informality was that they were confused as to where responsibility rested, and this detracted from the quality of their learning. In many institutions, the reviewers noted that although the quality assurance

framework appeared robust, it was not always implemented fully at the subject level. Sometimes, because of an emphasis on a culture of informality, there was a reluctance to implement agreed institutional procedures at the subject level. At other times, the reviewers noted a blurring of the lines of communication, with quality management at subject level not being monitored effectively. In the best provision noted by the reviewers, the ownership by staff and students of quality management procedures was a key feature in creating a successful learning environment. However, the reviewers saw examples of staff and students having only a partial understanding of how quality assurance procedures operated. Also, there was evidence of staff having only limited involvement in the conduct of quality assurance, with little commitment, sense of ownership, or of high priority given to the process. Given these problems with the overall framework of quality management, some review teams concluded that it was not always possible to confirm claims that the quality of student learning was assured. This was particularly so in FECs, where a substantial majority of the grades 1 and grades 2 for this aspect had been given by review teams. However, it was recognised that these institutions had not always benefited from the institutional level review of their HE quality assurance systems.

Annual monitoring and periodic review

In the examples of good practice seen by the reviewers, the process of monitoring and evaluating the content and delivery of programmes operated through systems of annual monitoring and periodic review. Annual monitoring usually started with a report prepared by the subject team. This report typically analysed the learning experienced by students over the past year, informed by reports from module leaders, programme leaders, and the minutes of relevant committees. There would also be reference to external examiners' reports and detailed statistical information on retention and progression rates. There was comment and evidence on how the subject team dealt with issues raised in the last report, and an action plan on matters to be addressed over the next year, identifying those responsible for taking action.

Although practice varied, annual monitoring and periodic reports would usually be submitted to subject teams for their consideration, to learning and teaching committees and from there to the school or departmental boards of studies. After consideration at this level, depending on institutional structures, it would go to a faculty board, and finally to an institution-wide committee. In the majority of institutions, a central administrative team would progress reports to relevant committees, ensuring that appropriate and timely action was taken. A trend observed by the reviewers, was of an increasing number of institutions using HEFCE and, later, the Agency's six-aspect model for structuring the report. Also, the reviewers saw increasing evidence of institutions compiling from their subject annual reports examples of good practice across the institution. Such a comprehensive and rigorous approach to monitoring provision at the subject level was only apparent to the reviewers in a minority of examples. For the most part, there were some deficiencies in the content of reports, in the institutional evaluation of reports, or in the failure to take appropriate action.

In some subjects, because of the requirements of a professional accrediting organisation, the production of an annual report was universal. However, in virtually every subject where this was not a requirement, the reviewers identified institutions where annual reports were not routinely submitted by subject teams. In some of the early reports, the reviewers commented that whereas many of the post-1992 universities frequently had detailed and rigorous systems for annual monitoring of programmes, the pre-1992 universities more often relied on informal methods.

In some subjects, the reviewers concluded that the use of formal annual reporting was essential for ensuring that critical reflection on the quality of learning did take place. However, the absence of formal annual monitoring, leading to the production of a report, persisted throughout the review period. In other overview reports, the reviewers commented critically on the procedures employed in annual monitoring. In some cases this reflected the scope of monitoring, with a focus on individual modules, rather than the students' learning experience as a whole. Here, the reviewers

observed that such a limited approach meant that the main purpose of quality assurance was lost, to the detriment of student learning.

Reviewers often noted that annual monitoring had paid insufficient attention to the recommendations of external examiners and, sometimes, their reports were not routinely considered or referred to in annual reports. Similar comments were made with respect to the failure of staff involved in annual monitoring to always consider the views of students on the quality of their learning experience.

As noted above in the student progression and achievement chapter, a recurrent theme throughout the review period was the doubts expressed by the reviewers concerning the reliability of statistical and management information used in the evaluation of programmes. Of particular concern was the difficulty experienced by many subject teams in maintaining and retrieving detailed and up-to-date statistical data on the student profile, and on the progression and achievement of individuals and groups of students. This, together with the weaknesses identified above, led many teams of reviewers to the conclusion that the annual monitoring of the student learning experience was insufficiently self-critical and evaluative.

In many subject review reports, the reviewers identified deficiencies in the conduct of the various committees dealing with annual monitoring and reporting. A frequent comment concerned the inadequate recording of decisions, including the nature of the action to be taken, identifying those responsible for taking action and the deadline for implementation. In one subject overview report, the reviewers noted that in 70 per cent of examples, following identification of an issue, there was scope for improvement in defining clearly what action should be taken and by whom. These and other reports also provided evidence that in many institutions the identified issues took a long time to be resolved, to the detriment of the quality of learning.

In part, this reflected concerns about the adequacy of links between subject teams and those staff at higher levels in the institution who had responsibility for implementing quality assurance procedures. In a number of reports, the reviewers commented on a lack of clarity in lines of accountability, suggesting that either there was an absence of higher level monitoring of decisions requiring action, or that institutional procedures for responding to annual reports were not sufficiently rigorous.

In most subject overview reports, the reviewers offered a much more positive picture with respect to the intensive reviews carried out usually at five-year intervals. From the commencement of the review process, the reviewers, across all subjects, commended the practice of requiring subject teams to document the changes and progress they had made to the curricula, teaching and learning, support for students and their achievements, and in the use of learning resources. In a number of institutions, the quinquennial review was aligned to the review procedures of accrediting organisations. Also, the reviewers saw evidence of institutions timing this review during a period leading up to a subject review. This had provided the reviewers with opportunities to scrutinise all the documentation used in the quinquennial review and to comment on the effectiveness of the process. A feature of these reviews was the use made of external experts and students on panels reviewing the quality of the students' learning experience.

Student involvement in quality assurance

In all subjects, the reviewers saw a variety of methods employed by institutions to elicit the views of students on the quality of education they experienced. The formal mechanisms for eliciting student opinion included the use of questionnaire surveys, staff-student liaison committees and student representatives on decision-making committees. Also, in every overview report, the reviewers referred to the importance of informal contact between staff and students. Generally, the reviewers saw evidence that staff took very seriously the views of their students.

Questionnaire surveys were increasingly used throughout the sector to secure detailed information about students' views of the quality of their learning. Usually, there were end-of-module surveys designed to probe the level of student satisfaction with the content of the syllabus, the teaching and learning methods employed, assessment practice and learning resources available. In some institutions, these surveys were supplemented by questionnaires dealing with the programme of study as a whole. Often, there were also institutional surveys that dealt with students' perceptions of the adequacy of centrally-provided services, including the library and IT facilities. However, the reviewers noted that the use of all three types of questionnaire could lead to overload and reduce the response rate by students.

There was considerable variety in the focus of questionnaires, including the depth of questioning involved, ranging from requiring nothing more than students to rank responses on a numerical scale, to those requiring a much more detailed response. Although the use of questionnaire surveys was generally commended, the reviewers had some concerns about their implementation, including the wide range of response rates to these surveys. The most serious concern identified by the reviewers was that, in a significant number, not all institutions undertook a detailed analysis of completed questionnaires. Related to this, the reviewers also saw evidence of no or very limited feedback by staff to their students on the findings of this analysis and what action had been taken or proposed. This called into question the purpose of this form of consultation, leading students to question the relevance and value of questionnaire surveys. To overcome this weakness, some institutions arranged for feedback sessions to be held early in each semester so that students could discuss the outcome of questionnaire surveys.

Throughout the review period there was increasing evidence of the use of staff and student liaison or consultative committees for gathering student opinion. In some, where there were few students on a programme, all students could attend these committees. In others, students elected colleagues to represent them on committees. In examples of good practice seen by the reviewers, these committees met frequently, with a detailed record of minutes, reflecting the seriousness with which both staff and students treated their deliberations.

The reviewers also saw evidence of student representation on decision-making committees at departmental, faculty and institutional levels. This was not a universal practice but, where it occurred, students expressed satisfaction that this enabled them to check that their concerns were being addressed at the appropriate level. Throughout the review period, there was increased evidence of institutions providing training to students on how to undertake the role of student representative. Sometimes, the reviewers noted that student attendance at committee meetings was low, partly due to the lack of timely information about them. However, in many reports there was clear evidence of students' views influencing changes to the curriculum, teaching and assessment methods and in the availability of resources.

External examiners

In all reports, the reviewers pointed to the crucial role of external examiners in providing assurance on the overall quality of the students' learning experience. In fulfilling this role, external examiners oversaw the soundness of assessment practices, and confirmed the appropriateness of degree classifications and the achievements of students.

Good practice seen by the reviewers included well-established procedures for the initial appointment of external examiners and for subsequent communication with them. They were provided with induction into the assessment practices of the institution, often with briefing sessions and guidance notes on their role, the conduct of assessment boards, and the format of external examiners' reports. The institutions also had clear procedures for the receipt, consideration and response to these reports.

Although the reviewers saw much evidence of good practice, ensuring the quality of the students' learning experience, they also saw evidence of deficiencies that diminished the quality of provision.

In some reports the reviewers noted that external examiners had not been briefed on, or received guidance on their role, leading on occasion to confusion over the part they should play in the moderation of students' assessed work. There was also considerable variation in the format, style and content of external examiners' reports. These ranged from the requirement that external examiners did little more than tick a set of boxes to confirm their opinions, to lengthy and comprehensive reports offering detailed analyses of students' achievements. Reviewers concluded that, across the sector, there were examples of a lack of rigour in some external examiners' reports. There were also examples where external examiners' reports were not promptly received by institutions, as well as missing reports, raising concerns about the level of involvement by external examiners in the assessment process. These weaknesses, identified by the reviewers throughout the review period, led them to the view that, in some instances, external examiners' reports were making only a limited contribution to maintaining the quality of students' learning.

In the majority of institutions, reviewers saw clear evidence of external examiners' reports being considered by the relevant committees, with the identification of action necessary to deal with the criticisms and recommendations made in their reports. However, in many overview reports, there was evidence of a failure to give full consideration to reports, or to respond to external examiners. In some reports the reviewers noted that concerns raised by external examiners over several years had been ignored. This, together with the failure to routinely consider external examiners' reports in the annual evaluation of programmes, clearly limited opportunities for enhancing the quality of learning.

Employers and professional bodies

In a number of subjects, the reviewers saw requirements that academic programmes must be accredited by a professional organisation. In such examples, there were usually close links with the profession, involving periodic review of the subject, sometimes jointly with the Agency. In a number of reports it was noted that the process of accreditation provided a stimulus for innovation in curricula and in teaching and learning methods, consequently enhancing the quality of learning.

In these subjects, the reviewers also found that subject teams were more likely to have established liaison or consultative committees with local professional and employer groups. Frequently, this enabled subject teams to be kept informed of industry trends and training requirements. However, there were also examples of close links with industry in subject areas that did not have accreditation arrangements. In some subjects, the reviewers identified strong links with industrial employers, leading to industrial placements for their students and consultancy work for staff. These arrangements were of direct benefit to students, but the reviewers also saw examples where opportunities for close industrial links were largely ignored by subject teams. In some instances the reviewers argued that the absence of a formal mechanism for liaison with employers denied the subject team advice on curricula innovation. Also, the lack of effective liaison meant that subject teams lost the opportunity to learn directly from employers about the effectiveness of their programmes in preparing students for employment. In many reports, the absence of effective links with employers led the reviewers to conclude that more could be done to improve the quality of the students' learning experience.

Staff development

The procedures for the approval of programmes, their periodic review and annual evaluation using contributions from students, staff, external examiners, professional organisations and employers all contributed to enhancing the quality of provision. However, the reviewers also explored with subject providers the systems they had in place for realising the full potential of their academic and support staff to secure further improvement in the quality of learning experienced by students. This included the arrangements made for new staff, the means employed to identify the development needs of established staff derived from quality assurance processes, and the use of mechanisms for the dissemination of good practice within the institution.

In the first round of reviews, the reviewers found little evidence of coherent staff development strategies. In the early reports the emphasis was on staff research activity as the main vehicle for professional development and career enhancement. In these, and other early reports, the reviewers made frequent reference to the lack of attention given to the development of teaching skills. They pointed out that where courses for developing teaching skills existed, few established teachers availed themselves of the opportunity to improve their teaching practice. The reviewers noted that only a few institutions had well-established systems for the appraisal of staff, and that peer observation of teaching was quite rare. In many of these reports, reviewers encouraged the establishment of more effective mechanisms for teachers to become aware of, and share good teaching practice.

An area of strength identified by the reviewers in the first round of reviews was that most institutions possessed sound measures for dealing with the needs of new staff. The induction of new staff was effective and, for the most part, for the first year of their appointment, these staff had an experienced colleague acting as their mentor. Training programmes were usually available for new staff with no previous teaching experience and, in a few examples, this training could be used to secure a recognised teaching qualification. However, a common feature identified in the early reports, that to varying degrees persisted into the most recent round of reviews, was that induction, mentoring and training facilities were rarely extended to part-time staff or research students engaged in teaching.

In the reports published in 1995-96, the reviewers still noted that it was rare to find formally agreed staff development policies. However, there was increased evidence of staff appraisal and peer observation of teaching being undertaken in many more institutions. Staff increasingly saw appraisal as a useful means of identifying their professional development needs. The reviewers noted that the introduction of peer observation of teaching was a sensitive matter, but they saw examples of good practice, including pairing arrangements between staff in different subjects. There was also evidence of staff reflecting on their work in teaching and learning forums. The reviewers were generally more positive about the benefits of peer observation. They noted that the recognition by staff of the good practices developed by their colleagues and incorporated into their teaching, led to an overall improvement in the quality of delivery to students.

In contrast to the evidence of development in staff appraisal and peer observation, the reviewers found that established staff were still reluctant to attend development courses designed to enhance their teaching and learning skills. Also, the reviewers had continuing concerns about the failure to make training in teaching skills available to part-time staff, teaching assistants and research students, many of whom had heavy teaching loads.

In the reports published after 1998, the reviewers identified a number of developments in staff development policies. They found that new staff more frequently registered for a recognised teaching qualification. Also, in some instances, part-time staff and research students could attend training courses designed for full-time staff, and also received induction training and mentoring.

In most later subject rounds, reviewers found that staff appraisal was well developed in a majority of institutions and was instrumental in identifying staff development needs. There was also clear evidence of extensive use of peer observation of teaching that, in the reviewers' opinion, ensured more widespread dissemination of good teaching practice and, in consequence, enhanced the quality of learning experienced by students. However, such developments were not universal, and the failure to introduce staff appraisal and peer observation of teaching by some providers, was seen by the reviewers as a missed opportunity to enhance the quality of the students' learning experience.

In the majority of reports, there was reference to the emergence of learning and teaching committees in most institutions. They often provided a forum for staff and students to reflect on the appropriateness of teaching and learning methods, and for the dissemination of good practice. In later review visits, the reviewers also saw the development of staff 'away days' and focus groups to disseminate information about good teaching practice. However, even in the most recent rounds

of visits, the reviewers found evidence of reluctance on the part of established staff to attend professional updating courses for the enhancement of their teaching skills.

Conclusions

In the early review period, the reviewers expressed concern over institutional arrangements for ensuring the quality of provision. In some examples they noted that clear and comprehensive quality frameworks did not exist, and, in others, that they were not fully developed or implemented. There was frequent reference to an over-reliance on informal quality procedures that lacked rigour and were insufficiently robust. In subsequent periods, the reviewers saw clear evidence of development, with most institutions establishing effective quality management systems. However, even in the final round of visits, the reviewers saw examples where comprehensive, rigorous and robust institutional quality management systems existed but were not being applied.

Throughout the review cycle, the reviewers saw excellent examples of the annual monitoring of courses, leading to detailed annual reports drawing on a wide range of evidence. Such good practice was far from universal and, in the most recent round of visits, the reviewers noted instances where annual monitoring was not undertaken and reports not produced. Where annual monitoring was conducted, the reviewers identified widespread deficiencies in the evidence used, or in failure at institutional level to take appropriate action on recommendations made in reports.

A strong feature of quality management systems was in eliciting the views of students. This was done through questionnaire surveys and student participation in a number of committees. The reviewers usually commended the way staff respond to the concerns of students, and noted that an increasing number of institutions provided training for student representatives.

In every subject overview report, concern over the operation of the external examiner system was expressed. The reviewers saw evidence of excellent practice, but also significant deficiencies in the examining process. There were concerns about the briefing of external examiners, wide variations in the content of their reports, of reports not submitted, of external examiners not involved in the assessment process and the failure to take action following recommendations made by external examiners.

The reviewers saw good examples of the involvement of professional bodies and employers in the provision of courses. In the best examples, representatives of these groups met regularly in liaison committees with detailed records of the discussion and decisions. However, in many reports there was evidence that many subject teams did not consult with the professions or employers.

With respect to staff development activities, there was clear evidence of substantial development. Staff development strategies became commonplace, whereas at the commencement of the review period they were rare. Similarly, staff appraisal and peer observation of teaching were rare, but became more widespread across the sector. In early reports it was noted that little effort was made to disseminate good teaching/learning practice. The use of peer observation, teaching forums and the work of learning and teaching committees led to wider dissemination of good practice.

Throughout the review process, the reviewers generally commended the arrangements for the induction, mentoring and training of new full-time staff. However, they also noted that these arrangements were rarely extended to part-time staff or research and postgraduate students engaged in teaching. This was less often the case in visits conducted at the end of the review cycle.

Conclusion

Subject review in England and Northern Ireland between 1993 and 2001 was the largest and most comprehensive exercise of its kind ever undertaken. Some 2,904 subject review reports and 62 subject overview reports were published.

In 1994, after reviewing the initial period of operation, HEFCE restated the purpose of subject review. This chapter considers the extent to which these purposes were achieved and in doing so it highlights some of the positive attributes of HE in England and Northern Ireland. It goes on to consider the changes to the design and delivery of HE programmes, and then outlines some of the challenges remaining. It concludes by noting how the sector has responded to the issues identified in subject review reports.

The aims of subject review

In 1994, following the first round of subject review (1993-94), HEFCE reconsidered the operation of the process in the light of extensive consultation with the sector and through internal evaluation. As a result, the method was modified restating the purpose of subject review as being: to ensure accountability of public funds; to provide a link with funding to enhance quality; to provide accessible public information; and to share and publicise best practice.

In terms of the first stated aim of ensuring accountability of public funds, the cycle of subject review confirmed that the overwhelming majority of institutions were providing students with programmes that met expectations for quality and standards.

The second aim set for subject review, to provide a link between funding and the enhancement of quality, was met to some extent. Throughout the cycle, HEFCE retained the sanction to remove funding from providers where they were not achieving their own aims or objectives. There were 16 reviews where, on the first visit, reviewers found that providers were not meeting their own aims or objectives.

However, on re-review, the vast majority of major shortcomings had been rectified and the provision was labelled approved. In only one case did a re-review lead to a second non-approved judgement. Neither HEFCE nor the Department for Education and Learning and its predecessors in Northern Ireland ever used subject review outcomes to direct extra funding specifically to high-scoring providers. Instead, they established a Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning where institutions were able to bid for project support. These projects, usually of two years' duration and monitored by external advisers, were intended to give a boost to the dissemination of good practice in teaching and learning. They were superseded in 1998, by the setting up of 24 Learning and Teaching Subject Networks that were intended to provide long-term curriculum leadership in the subject areas.

The third main purpose of subject review was to provide accessible public information. This purpose has been achieved with the publication of all subject review reports since 1995. These are now available to prospective students and other stakeholders. In addition, 62 subject overview reports have been published. This achievement was recognised by Government in March 2001, when the Secretary for Education, David Blunkett, confirmed the end of universal subject review. In doing so, he noted at HEFCE and the Agency 'have now published a great deal of valuable information' which 'has rightly attracted international respect'. Reports have been made available on the Agency's website (www.qaa.ac.uk).

The final aim of subject review, the sharing of best practice, has been achieved in three principal ways. The first of these focused on the training of the individuals who undertook the reviews on behalf of HEFCE and the Agency. By the end of the cycle of subject review in 2001, 98 review chairs and more than 5,700 subject specialists had been trained in the subject review methodology. The majority of those trained worked in institutions that were HE providers in England and Northern Ireland. The training ensured widespread knowledge of existing good practice among the reviewers. Evaluations completed by subject reviewers after each review repeatedly attested to the fact that the experience of undertaking a subject review enabled them to reflect in great depth on their own and their colleagues' practices. As such, subject review contributed to the spreading of a great deal of good practice across the sector.

Secondly, institutions were informed of sector-wide best practice by their own staff acting as subject specialists visiting other institutions, and also participating in subject reviews themselves. An early indication of the impact of the cycle of subject review on institutions was provided in a 1997 HEFCE report, which concluded that 'two-thirds of assessors' recommendations had been acted upon'. These actions included the 'formalisation of procedures and improved documentation, reviews and revisions to curricula and to teaching and assessment methods, staff development and resource allocation'.

Finally, best practice has also been shared through the development and publication of subject review reports and subject overview reports. The main body of these reports highlights the major trends in HE provision during this period. These are briefly considered here with reference to the design and delivery of HE programmes.

The design and delivery of HE programmes

HE provision in England and Northern Ireland remains diverse in content and style of delivery, and is focused on student learning. However, students entering HE programmes today will have a very different experience from that of their predecessors in 1993. Information about programmes is more comprehensive and understandable, as it is produced with students more in mind. Programmes are more focused on meeting students' needs. Students are expected to take a greater role in their own education, as the emphasis has shifted from teaching to learning. Also, students now have a greater role in quality management and enhancement.

Changes to the context of HE in England and Northern Ireland during the cycle of subject review - including a rapid increase in the number of students enrolling for HE programmes, increased emphasis on transferable and cognitive skills and, at the same time, a real decline in the unit of resources per student provided by Government - has meant that providers have had to take a more systematic approach to the design and delivery of HE programmes. This has manifested itself in a number of ways in the design and delivery of curricula, and has centred on student achievement of the intended learning outcomes set for a programme.

In terms of curricula, the majority of subject review reports demonstrate that they are carefully designed to be internally coherent. Clearly defined and regularly reviewed aims and learning outcomes for a programme are a key point in this process. As the review cycle progressed, it became apparent that generic and transferable skills were becoming an increasingly important aspect of the curricula, alongside student's attainment of subject-specific knowledge.

In line with this more systematic approach to the design and delivery of HE programmes, there is greater emphasis on the match between teaching and learning, and student achievement of learning outcomes. Departmental teaching and learning committees frequently oversee strategic development to this end. As a result, there has been considerable innovation in teaching and learning. While lectures remain the key mechanism for the delivery of subject material, small-group teaching and IT resources are increasingly employed to ensure the attainment of relevant transferable and cognitive skills. Nowadays, moreover, students are encouraged to take greater responsibility for their own learning, leading to greater emphasis on independent learning.

Similarly, there are many instances of considerable development in the area of assessment. Innovation has occurred in terms of the range of assessment methods employed. For example, examinations are no longer the dominant form of summative assessment, and continuous assessment has become increasingly common. Both formative and summative assessment often include the assessment of transferable and cognitive skills as well as subject knowledge. Information with regard to assessment criteria is now much more transparent to all involved in the marking process, including subject staff, external examiners and, most importantly, students. Finally, helpful and timely feedback on both formative and summative work is increasingly the norm.

HE providers in England and Northern Ireland have long been regarded as particularly effective in the provision of student support and guidance, especially for undergraduates. From the outset of subject review, the vast majority of subject review reports and subject overview reports have confirmed this reputation. Nonetheless, subject providers have sought to further develop their systems. Admission and induction arrangements for all, but especially mature, part-time and postgraduate students, together with those having non-traditional entry requirements, have been enhanced. Personal tutor systems operated by the subject provider now more often encompass students other than undergraduates and are more closely integrated with a wide range of centrally provided support services, such as welfare and careers. Personal tutors are often provided with specific training to undertake this role.

The accelerating cost of learning resources, including the rapid introduction of ICT to support learning, at a time of declining levels of resourcing, is a further area which has demanded a more systematic approach by providers. As a result, new acquisitions are more often predicated on the needs of taught students. Institutions have facilitated access to additional resources by negotiating arrangements with other libraries, museums or art galleries, and provided access to online journals and the internet. Access to existing resources has often been enhanced, for example, through extending opening hours, creating electronic (and, increasingly, online) library catalogues and making arrangements for short-term borrowing.

The approach to the design and delivery of HE programmes in England and Northern Ireland summarised above has been underpinned in part by a more systematic approach to quality management and enhancement. The subject review and overview reports, especially in the later rounds, note a range of positive features. Integrated systems for validation, annual monitoring and periodic review are much more widespread, often involving the participation of external subject specialists or practitioners. Reviews are based on a comprehensive evidence base, including analysis of student progression, performance and achievement statistics. Students' views on the quality of provision are elicited more extensively and routinely, particularly through module and programme evaluation questionnaires, staff-student liaison committees and student participation in programme, departmental and faculty quality assurance committees. Staff development, including the mentoring and training of new full and (increasingly) part-time staff, and peer observation of teaching and other mechanisms for sharing good-practice, also characterise effective quality management and enhancement systems.

Challenges remaining

In general, reports emanating from the cycle of subject review attest to the positive reputation of HE provision in England and Northern Ireland, and that the vast majority of students receive education of a good quality. However, the reports also point to a number of areas where concerns about the quality of provision remain. It needs to be stressed that, overall, these are not widespread problems, but they do remain an important issue for some providers.

Most providers have adopted a more systematic approach to the design and delivery of their provision. The focus is on student achievement of intended learning outcomes. However, some subject review reports, including some from the final rounds, demonstrate that this approach is not uniform. For example, in designing their programmes some providers continue to confuse aims with intended learning outcomes. In other instances, providers have failed to design the curriculum adequately to ensure opportunities for students to attain the transferable and cognitive skills relevant to their programme of study.

The assessment of students' attainment of intended learning outcomes also remains uneven. In some extreme instances, learning outcomes are not assessed. In other examples there is a lack of clearly communicated assessment criteria and inadequate feedback on assessed work. As such, assessment remains one of the aspects of HE provision in England and Northern Ireland in which there remains scope for improvement.

Although student support and guidance is one of the most prominent strengths of HE provision in England and Northern Ireland, some problems remain. These principally relate to the frequency of contact between students and their tutors, and the less structured support systems that operate for combined honours, part-time, distant and postgraduate students. As with student support and guidance, the reported strengths in the learning resources aspect heavily outweigh persisting concerns. The most common of these relates to teaching accommodation, which was quite often reported as overcrowded, unsuitable or poorly equipped, and to the limited access to library or ICT resources.

Quality management and enhancement at the subject level features as a concern in a wide number of reports. In some instances institutional procedures are not being scrupulously applied at the subject level. In other instances annual monitoring is not undertaken, or the evidence (including statistics relating to progression and achievement) on which it is undertaken is lacking or deficient. In other examples there are concerns about the operation of the external examiner system. In these examples, institutional management does not always fulfil its responsibilities, especially in FECs, where there is limited experience of external scrutiny of HE quality assurance procedures. Examples of these are ensuring that annual monitoring is conducted appropriately or ensuring that the external verifier or examiner system is operated in an acceptable way.

Finally, in some instances, mechanisms for enhancement are sometimes inadequately developed. Staff development, especially the induction, mentoring and training of part-time staff and teaching assistants is insufficient or not equal to that provided for full-time staff. Peer observation, although widespread, is not always used to ensure the dissemination of good practice in teaching.

Quality assurance and the future

The HE sector has not been complacent about the weaknesses that became evident during the cycle of subject review. Even before 2001 and the end of the cycle, the sector had instigated a new era of quality assurance in HE, which included for the first time a new focus on the standards set for and achieved by students. At the heart of this new era is the academic infrastructure. Developed largely in response to the recommendations of the Dearing Committee, the infrastructure consists of 42 *Subject benchmark statements*, *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* and *Guidelines on programme specifications*. Written by representatives of the HE sector working in conjunction with the Agency, the academic infrastructure is designed as a series of reference points for HE providers to use in the assurance of quality and standards.

New methods of external quality assurance have been developed. These are founded on the shared belief that responsibility for assuring quality and standards is best located at the level of the institution. The new methods focus on how institutions, in their management of quality and standards, are engaging with the academic infrastructure. Principal among these at the institutional level is institutional audit and, at the subject level, academic review.

In its design, academic review at the subject level differs significantly from subject review in that it reviews quality and standards. It also responds to the weaknesses emerging from subject review reports. Student achievement of intended learning outcomes is given greater prominence, as are assessment and the management and enhancement of quality and standards. The nature of the review process has also been altered. First, in line with the Dearing report's recommendations, academic standards set for and achieved by students now come within the remit of external review teams. Secondly, review visits are no longer concentrated into a few consecutive days activity, but involve a number of visits over a six-week period, so in total there are fewer days spent by review teams in an institution. Academic review is not universal, and there is no system of numerical grading. In the first instance, as designated by HEFCE, it has focused on those sectors (for example, FECs) and institutions which had relatively poor track records during the cycle of subject review or which had had little or no track record in subject review. Academic review has not been applied in Northern Ireland.

This report provides a summary of the trends and findings of the cycle of subject review undertaken in England and Northern Ireland between 1993 and 2001, and assesses the extent to which subject review achieved the purposes set for it by HEFCE in 1994. The 2,904 subject review reports and 62 subject overview reports emanating from subject review provide extensive evidence for the high quality of HE in these two constituent parts of the United Kingdom. It is from this sound base that a new era of external quality assurance has been developed, and which is now being implemented, more information on which can be found at www.qaa.ac.uk

Annex 1: The Grade Descriptors

Tests to be applied

To what extent do the student learning experience and student achievement, within this aspect of provision, contribute to meeting the objectives set by the subject provider?

Do the objectives set, and the level of attainment of those objectives, allow the aims set by the subject provider to be met?

Scale Points

- 1 The aims and/or objectives set by the subject provider are not met; there are major shortcomings that must be rectified.
- 2 This aspect makes an acceptable contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives, but significant improvement could be made.
The aims set by the subject provider are broadly met.
- 3 This aspect makes a substantial contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives; however, there is scope for improvement.
The aims set by the subject provider are substantially met.
- 4 This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives.
The aims set by the subject provider are met.

Annex 2: Subjects reviewed by round, and publication number of subject overview reports

	Subjects	Reference no. for subject overview report
Round 1 April 93 - Jan 94	Law Chemistry History Mechanical Engineering	QO 1/95 QO/95 QO/95 QO4/95
Round 2 Jan 94 - Sept 94	Applied Science Architecture Business and Management Computer Studies Social Policy and Administration Environmental Studies Geography English Anthropology Geology Music	QO5/95 QO6/95 QO7/95 QO8/95 QO9/95 QO10/95 QO11/95 QO12/95 QO13/95 QO14/95 QO15/95
Round 3 Sept 94 - Apr 95	Chemical Engineering French German and Related Languages Iberian Languages and Studies Italian Linguistics Russian and East European Languages and Studies Sociology	QO1/96 QO2/96 QO3/96 QO4/96 QO5/96 QO6/96 QO7/96 QO8/96
Round 4 Apr 95 - Sept 96	American Studies East and South Asian Studies Middle Eastern and African Studies Materials Technology Land and Property Management General Engineering Building Food Science	QO1/98 QO2/98 QO3/98 QO4/98 QO5/98 QO6/98 QO7/98 QO8/98
Round 5 Oct 96 - Sept 98	Agriculture, Forestry and Agricultural Sciences History of Art, Architecture and Design Mechanical, Aeronautical and Manufacturing Engineering Town and Country Planning and Landscape Communications and Media Drama, Dance and Cinematics Civil Engineering Electrical and Electronic Engineering	QO9/98 QO10/98 QO11/98 QO12/98 QO13/98 QO14/98 QO15/98 QO16/98

	Subjects	Reference no. for subject overview report
Round 6 Oct 98 - Sept 00	Veterinary Medicine Pharmacology and Pharmacy Anatomy and Physiology Psychology Dentistry Mathematics, Statistics and Operational Research Medicine Molecular Biosciences Organismal Biosciences Nursing Other Subjects Allied to Medicine Art and Design	QO1/2000 QO2/2000 QO3/2000 QO4/2000 QO5/2000 QO6/2000 QO7/2000 QO8/2000 QO9/2000 QO10/2000 QO11/2000 QO12/2000
Round 7 Oct 00 - Dec 01	Economics Theology and Religious Studies Hospitality, Leisure, Recreation, Sport and Tourism Celtic Studies Business and Management Librarianship and Information Management Politics Archaeology Classics and Ancient History Education Philosophy	QO1/2001 QO2/2001 QO3/2001 QO4/2001 QO5/2001 QO6/2001 QO7/2001 QO8/2001 QO9/2001 QO10/2001 QO11/2001

Glossary

Cognitive skills

The Dearing Report included 'an understanding of methodologies or ability in critical analysis.

The cycle of subject review

The cycle of subject review commenced in 1993 and was completed in 2001. It consisted of seven rounds of activity. During each round a group of subject areas were reviewed.

Dearing Report

See National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education. (NCIHE)

EHE

Enterprise in Higher Education initiative

FEC

Further Education College

FEFC

Further Education Funding Council. Until 1999 the FEFC was responsible for funding the provision of higher national certificates (HNCs) in FECs. Subsequently, HEFCE has been responsible for funding all HE in FECs.

HE

Higher Education

HEFCE

Higher Education Funding Council for England. Originally commissioned, designed and managed the early rounds of subject review (1993-1997). For later rounds it commissioned the QAA to manage the process.

HEI

Higher Education Institution

HESDA

Higher Education Staff Development Agency (formerly UCOSDA). Reflecting the growing role of FECs in higher education UCOSDA was renamed in 2000 as HESDA.

Key skills

Often referred to as transferable skills, the Dearing Report listed these as 'communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn'.

National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education. (NCIHE)

Often referred to as the Dearing Committee (after its Chairman), its terms of reference were to make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years, recognising that higher education embraces teaching, learning, scholarship and research'. Its far-reaching and influential report Higher education in the learning society (often referred to as the Dearing Report) was published in 1997

PSRBs

Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies

QAA

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Established in 1997, it was commissioned by HEFCE the design and management of later rounds of subject review.

Review chair

Independent or seconded HE experts who chaired review teams, and edited reviewer's contributions to produce a report

Subject review rounds

In order to ease the management of the cycle of subject review, there were seven rounds of subject review activity. In each round all the providers of a number of subject areas were reviewed. Typically, a subject review round lasted for 1 - 1.5 years.

Subject

Subject is used here as shorthand for unit of assessment. It is recognised that a subject may contain one or more courses or programmes of study, possibly at different levels (for example diploma, undergraduate, taught postgraduate).

Subject providers

The departments / schools / faculties which, on behalf of their institution, provide the education which is the object of the review.

Subject overview report

Once all the providers of a particular subject had been reviewed, a subject overview report was produced. The number of providers, and therefore the basis of the overview reports, ranged in size from 4 (Celtic Studies) to 162 (Business and Management). These can be found on the QAA website at www.qaa.ac.uk.

Subject review reports

For each subject review visit undertaken a subject review report was written. A total of 2904 reports were produced. These can be found on the QAA website at www.qaa.ac.uk.

Subject review facilitator (SRF)

SRFs were first established in 1998. They were intended to act in a liaison capacity between the review team and the subject providers. Importantly, they were also to act as a guardian of the subject review process ensuring that the review team adhered to the methodology set out in the Subject Review Handbook.

Subject specialist reviewer (SSR)

The vast majority of subject specialists were lecturers in higher education. The remainder were recruited from industry and the professions. Most review teams consisted of 3 SSRs and a review chair.

Transferable skills

See key skills

UCoSDA

Universities and Colleges Staff Development Agency (See HESDA above).

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Subject Review Handbooks (1998 and 2000)

Handbook for Academic Review

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